

Inn MÃ¡tik Munr

by Nefer-T

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Summary: Life as a young Viking adult in Berk might have gotten a lot more fun since dragons arrived, but theirs is still a harsh world. Battles remain to be fought - against warring tribes, stereotypes, tradition - all for the sake of freedom, willpower...and love. When you have to choose something to sacrifice, which one will you leave behind? Love, or duty?/HICCSTRID

1. Chapter 1

Inn MÃ¡tki Munr

_So, the title basically translates to "The Mighty Passion". I think it sounds pretty epic, but hey! That's just me and my fiddles.
:) _

So, I've been disconnected from for a LONG time now. I just totally lost inspiration for my Fullmetal Alchemist fics after I'd lost some chapters I had worked on so diligently when my computer decided to meltdown. I still do love edxWin smut, mufufufufu.

_However, I recently saw the trailer for HTTYD2 and could NOT get this out of my head. xD Let's just see where it goes, shall we? I am rating it _**Teen**_ for the language and... possibly some more explicit scenes, but I may change it to Mature somewhere along the way. You have been warned - I like lemons, and while I may not necessarily be writing one every chapter, there may be a spontaneous citrus lying about somewhere, if I see it fits within the story._

I'll tend to the rating if it gets there. :p

so! Enough babble, and on with the fic. Enjoy! (hopefully, lol)

**DISCLAIMER: **I do not own How to Train Your Dragon or its

characters. Duh.

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><p>CHAPTER ONE - Bad news are bad.</p>

* * *

><p>The weather was wonderful that day; sun high in the sky, it was warm, and there was a lovely spring breeze wafting about. The huge, burly man hulked over to where the group of teenagers were, merrily breaking their fast outside, drinking mead and eating bread and fish, all of them sprawled in the lush grass surrounding the town square â€“ his son laughing at some joke, blissfully unaware of the ill news that awaited him.</p>

Stoick felt terrible about ruining such a fine day, but he couldn't postpone this any longer. Odin knows he tried to, but no more; there was a deadline to give the response to that gods-forsaken letter he'd received.

"I need to talk to you, son." Hiccup didn't budge. "Now. In private."

Everyone fell silent all of a sudden. Stoick usually didn't speak in such a grim tone unless he had bad news on his hands; well, he'd used to talk to Hiccup a certain way when they boy'd been younger, beforeâ€¦ before Toothless showed up and changed everything.

As Stoick walked back into his house, he hoped his long strides did not betray his nervousness. He heard Hiccup get up and follow him.

He really didn't want to do this, but was there a choice?

Hiccup glanced over from his father's large back to their house, back and forth. His father had been receiving loads of correspondence lately, and had been in a bit of a sour mood; Hiccup had a feeling he unwillingly had something to do with it.

"Guess your streak of perfect behaviour's gone down the drain, huh?" Snotlout teased while he chewed, spraying some food into his mug. Hiccup ignored his cousin and stood up, shaking the bread crumbs from his tunic.

Before he walked away, Hiccup looked over to Astrid and nodded discretely; she nodded back. They'd planned to go riding together by the end of the day, what with the weather being as good as it was, to go to the hot springs inside the mountain. He liked to think of it as their little spot; it sent his heart beating frantically whenever he thought about going there with her.

Things always happened whenever they went there. The first time they found that particular natural sauna had been a couple of months ago, a day before Hiccup left on one of his scouting trips; when they left the cave an hour later, just before sunset, they were both flushed and breathless and not entirely due to the steam from the hot water.

He liked what they had. Were they officially a couple? He wasn't

entirely sure because they'd never really talked about it, and always tried to be discrete around everyone else, but what else could they be? They kissed, and occasionally groped each other â€“ nothing too daring, of course â€“ so he figured they kind of were, in their own way.

And he was happy about it. So he hummed tunelessly over to his house, his father's dark demeanour suddenly forgotten; he was focused on their trip to the hot springs, and for a few minutes those thoughts brought him nothing but a sheer sense of satisfaction.

But when his father solemnly told him to sit down, he sourly noted his bliss was to be a short-lived one.

"Did I do something wrong, Dad?" He wondered what was going on; lately Hiccup had done nothing but his duties to the village, scouting diligently, charting, mapping, exploring â€“ bringing back tales of what he found and his newly-acquired knowledge â€“ and dragon-training, of course. He'd even heard one of the villagers say it was truly lucky that they would, someday, have a very knowledgeable Chief. He'd blushed.

"No, son. Nothing." Stoick then decided to add, "I'm nothing but proud of you, son," just for reassurance. Hiccup let out a breath he did not know he was holding.

"Okay... Well, what is it then?" Hiccup asked, those smart green eyes a kindle with both curiosity and caution.

Stoick struggled for words. For days now, he'd not known what to say. He'd practised his words, but they did not seem to come out right, so he'd practised the speech in his mind dozens of timesâ€| and to no avail. Still, he was at a loss. How to explain this?

"Wellâ€| sonâ€| You see, there's thisâ€| Ye know, you'reâ€| my son." Stoick stammered.

"Oh, what a shocking reveal."

Stoick ignored his son's jest. "And, wellâ€| you've _grown_â€|"

For a moment Hiccup donned a smug expression on his face. "Yeah, a bit."

"An' I suppose you're a man now. Well, still a boyâ€|. Well, sometimesâ€| but sometimes a man, an' that man's gonna be Chief of Berk someday." Stoick made a face like he was holding in some major gas.

"Uhâ€| A long time from now, let's hope. Right, Dad?" This conversation sure was leading down an ominous path.

"Right. But, wellâ€|" Stoick decided to just get it out with, or they'd be here all day and night. "Son," he said, pointing at the man-boy's face, "you're almost nine-and-ten now. A man grown, by all standards, and you've proved yourself a fine one, and for that I am thankful."

Hiccup couldn't say anything at this point. He was being _complimented_?

"An' I'm sure you'll make a fine Chief someday. You have leadership in you, you have your own sort ofâ€|" he fiddled around for the right word. "â€|charisma. An' you've got guts, I tell ya that. You've got a way with the beasts, an' people are respectful of that sort of power."

For a moment, Hiccup could actually see the wrinkles hidden amongst his father's huge mane of a beard, as if weighed down by his words.

"An' you've got to learn: a leader must sometimes make sacrifices. For the good of his people."

Wait a minuteâ€| "Haven't I sacrificed already?" Hiccup deadpanned, lifting up his metallic leg to prove his point.

"I know, son. But this is different." Stoick sighed. One last push. "You're of age to marry, Hiccup." He noticed his son's eyes flash and widen, his cheeks redden in sudden discomfort, hands clenching around the bench he sat on. "An' I've been gettin' some pressure from other clans. The Bunkerheads â€" you remember the ones that've been threatening with war â€" they say they'd sign a peace treaty if you married the daughter of Chief Athole 'The Blister'. Soâ€|"

By then Hiccup had gone pale white, the color of curdled milk. He held his breath.

"This is what I've come to tell you, son," Stoick produced a parchment, seemingly from inside his enormous bushy beard, "The terms for the wedding contract with that Bunkerhead girl, ermâ€|" He checked the parchment, "Bergthora."

Silence. More silence. After a few minutes, Hiccup started to blink furiously. He ruffled his untamed hair in a nervous tick and shot up suddenly, color violently returning to his cheeks, "I don't care what they claim to want," his voice trembled, "I'm not some object, to be used as a peace offering."

"Son. I know this isn't what you'd planned. But maybe â€""

"No maybes. I'm not marrying that girl, whoever she is, and that's it. We can come to other terms for that peace agreement." Hiccup made to walk up the stairs to his bedroom.

"They're adamant, Hiccup. They've been pressuring ever since the girl's turned six-and-ten, over a year ago, and this would be a convenient alliance. I've been giving you time, but now we need to make a choice before the next harvest to Idun."

"I DON'T CARE!" All of a sudden the boy shifted into a man, his voice booming, his face scowled in anger, his swollen chest heaving with uneven breath; defiant, "I'm not throwing myself into Odin knows what sort of marriage, with a girl I don't know! You can't do this to me! It's **my** life, I'm not just a fucking convenience!"

And with that he took off, ignoring his father's shouts behind him. He ran outside, called for Toothless, and immediately jumped onto his dragon's back, quickly sliding into his complex saddle. He was absurdly thankful that his companion had rebuked his attempts to

remove the saddle from its back last night.

As he rose up into the skies, powerful black scaly wings beating at the air around him, detaching him from the village down below, he could feel everyone's eyes on him. Burning stares, he sensed them, and for a moment he felt like a little boy who'd just screwed up again, getting yelled at by his father. He never usually yelled back when he was a kid, but he was a child no longer. He wanted to look down then, to scream at all of them that he was no kid, but a man grown, and responsible for his own life. He'd sacrificed himself for them before, lost a limb, nearly his life and his dragon's; so he wanted to take control of his own matters with his own hands, and no tribal dispute should be getting in the middle of what he wanted out of his life!

He wanted to look down then, and tell them that. Tell them **all**. But he couldn't bring himself to see if Astrid was watching â€“ he feared that if he saw her face, the knot in his throat would tighten to the point where it would choke him to death.

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER ONE

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><p>Well, this one's wrapped up. I'll publish the next one tomorrow, most likely, or maybe tonight. It's already done, just needs some tweaks I think - and, yes, I'll get to the romance soon enough, if that's what ya'll are wondering.

Please bear in mind that I don't have a Beta Reader to fix my screw-ups, so any pointed mistakes are appreciated (...if I eventually decide to tend to them, lulz) and any suggestions as well. Don't be shy! Reviews are a very helpful way to help someone progress with their story-telling skillz0rz.

Just don't flame, haters. Not my fault you have nothing better to do with your life than being a sorry, bitter little person. Go watch a movie and eat popcorn. Go!

_Reviews are much appreciated, simply because, as readers, your opinions are much valued regarding plot, stylistics, grammar mistakes, etc. But the good old "_Hey, this is okay,_" works for me too!_

2. Introspective

Here's the second chapter. :) just going along with it, describing what I think is necessary for character development (and for scenaric purposes :p), moving this along at my own pace. Don't want to rush it.

i do enjoy getting into the characters' minds whenever possible... Sometimes maybe even a little bit too much. :p

Thank you for all the reviews! A lot of people were really sweet, so thanks. Much appreciated. :)

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><p>CHAPTER TWO: introspective

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><p>He finally slumped down on the soft, earthly soil after his rush of adrenaline had started to die down. Toothless had landed just near a series of small streams of water, clear liquid flowing from between the green-speckled rocks, running down the hill of the mountain to pour into a small lake. The scenery was nothing short of idyllic; water clambered on down from the large natural formation, one of the sides of the largest mountains in Berk, its stone face alive with fauna and flora alike. From above, that bit of the mountain side looked less grey, less stony; more like a gigantic bush, covered in all colors â€“ the green of the leaves, the lively colors of the many flowers upon it, the patterns created by the many a birds nesting upon the stones and roots.<p>

Down below, boy and dragon were surrounded by the stone wall behind them, the lake in the middle, the forest all around. Up above, high in the clear blue sky the sun was shining joyous heat upon all those below it; and underneath, the grass was so green and thick it looked as if the ground had been dyed with the finest dyes trader Johann could find.

After they had both quenched their thirst, a tired yet content Toothless bounded away to sprawl over a sun-bathed rock, blissfully unaware of human-related problems. However, he could sense that his little human felt troubled, so he had nudged him caringly on the ribs with his large, scaly head before heading out. The dragon was soon sound asleep, leaving its rider alone with bitter thoughts.

While he'd been flying, Hiccup hadn't thought about any of this; during that one hour up in the air, he'd managed to keep his mind clear and concentrate only on feeling, and on controlling the flight â€“ but he mostly let Toothless go where he liked, spiralling up and down the billowy clouds, skimming close to their own reflection upon the surface of the sea. All he'd cared about was the wind beating at his face and the thrill of the immensely high speed.

But now he was back on solid ground, those nagging thoughts came back to haunt him. He didn't want to marry some stranger. He didn't want his marriage to be arranged. He didn't want to be forced into it, with someone he didn't know. He didn't want to leave Astrid.

Astridâ€|

Hey! What kind of an idiot am I? Like Astrid would ever even consider marrying meâ€| we're just playing around until a suitable candidate comes along. Or rather, she's the one playing around, to be honestâ€|

But what's suitable, anyway? Hiccup was more than capable of paying a hefty bride-price to her parents; and no doubt his future position as a Chief was a major weigh-in. After all, his is the top of a Viking island's social ladder.

Oh, what in Hel's name am I thinking! He stood up, reprimanding himself for thinking about the whole thing as if it were an equation — he'd told his father not to think of him as an object, so why was he doing that to his relationship with Astrid?

Actually, he could count himself lucky. Girls don't usually get asked how they felt about their marriage; many were just thrown into it, and told to deal with it and get to know their husbands from scratch. Same with the men, but at least they could voice their opinion on the negotiations. And Hiccup had done just so — he wanted that chance to court Astrid and win her heart, so that if the day ever came to sign a wedding contract she'd be as willing to go for it as he was.

Wait, what? He was? Did he want to marry Astrid? Where did _that_ one come from? Well— actually—

It's not like he'd never even considered marriage before. In his younger years, he would oft daydream about the day he would become someone important, claiming Astrid's heart with effortless swoon. He would envision the awe-inspired faces of all those who shunned him as the wedding ceremony took its place, a grand event perfectly matching the appropriate magnitude of celebration.

His focus was not on the wedding itself; it was on the bond between him and his golden-haired, axe-wielding, fierce beloved. The wedding was more of a prize. Something to have bragging rights over — not that he was ever a boaster; but still, it would be quite the victory to prove all those people wrong. Yes, the village hiccup _could_ get the hot fierce girl. He wasn't just a screw-up, and he needed that to be shown— although, granted, thinking of marrying someone as proof that he was more successful was the wrong way to go about it.

It would never be just for the bragging rights, or the attention, Hiccup told himself as he stood up to stretch his legs. No, that's just me trying to justify the fact that, yes, I'd like to get married. To Astrid. Out of love, of course. I wonder if that's a girly thing to think?

Seldom had love ever been a prerequisite for Viking marriage, although it was considered ill fortune when one or both of the betrotheds were against the arrangement. No, wedlock was usually brought into existence as a necessity in his world — a much-needed alliance, the need for the dowry, a way to escape an unpleasant life — , but he was having a hard time coming to terms with that.

Why did traditions have to be such idiotic things? Could there not be some flexibility, some evolution in their ways? Vikings were stubborn, yes, and that's precisely why Hiccup strongly believed people should just go try to chase their happiness, write their own stories. Even so, when pressured in such a way, there were very few options left to choose from.

Still, marriage by love happened. Right? So they _might_ have a chance. Well, _he_ might have a chance. Maybe. Hopefully. After all, as few as they were, songs and poems had been written and sung in the memory of mighty passions that had existed in the Viking world. He wished he could be one of those cases.

But would he really risk a war between Viking tribes out of love for her?

He was afraid to even think it.

How about her?

If Astrid hadn't thought about it, they wouldn't be sneaking around all the time, would they? Everyone knew courtship was not an easy game for a man to play, because if the maiden's reputation was somehow at stake, then her family's was also on the slab â€“ making it very dangerous to the suitor to work his charms.

Of course, when they were younger nobody would think they would be up to some less-than-innocent activities whenever they'd disappear for hours. And, truthfully, they weren't. Lately, however, people would notice, and they would gossip â€“ and rightfully so. They would occasionally sneak around to be by themselves, and snogging was always a possibility. He did have the rest of the gang to thank; sometimes even unknowingly, they'd provided an alibi for the two of them to whisk away unnoticed.

He wondered if he'd had time to work his charms on Astrid. He hoped he'd at least gotten better at kissing; he still remembered that day she'd told him, "You can kiss me back, you know? Your head won't fall off," punching his arm afterward. The years had seemingly passed by in the blink of an eyeâ€¦

He went on with his musings, strolling around the forest, kicking at leaves and rocks as he walked farther and farther away from the snoring Toothless, disappearing under the unsteady shade provided by the tall green-leaved trees.

He walked and walked and walked, and pondered, and mused, and wracked his brain about what his choices were and weren't. Occasionally he would close his eyes and reminisce on a particularly long kiss, only to be rudely awoken from his reverie by tripping on some rock or root, muttering mute curses under his breath.

Eventually he decided to turn back to find Toothless again. It was getting terribly hot even under the shade, the midday sun now burning brightly, a little bit too cheery for his sour mood. Absurdly hot, for Berk. Even so, he needed the sun's good mood; maybe the heat would help kill the mould he felt was forming around his core.

So he went for a dip when he arrived at his destination. Unfastening the buckles. Off with the leather and the wool. Off with his boot, his breeches and his smallclothes â€“ and his prosthetic foot. Best not to overly-expose it to rust factors.

Carefully, clumsily, he hobbled into the mildly cool water, feeling refreshed and awakened. The small lake wasn't too deep, but he could at least still have a bit of a swim in it, so he did. His stump ached numbingly, but he ignored it and paddled along languidly, relishing the cold.

After a time he decided it was about time to leave the lake, and maybe during the afternoon they could go out flying somewhere else â€“ he just needed to get away from it all for a while. So he turned to look at Toothless, ready to call at him, when he noticed his

black-scaled friend had its ears up in the air, flipping about like antennae, its green eyes scouting the sky above.

"Someone's coming!" Hiccup whispered to himself as he scrambled around, as a sort of motivation to get out of the water faster. He managed to pull his breeches on before he heard the flap of dragon wings coming closer, and before he'd finished attaching his prosthetic, Astrid had landed on the ground nearby.

Well, there goes being alone with his thoughts. Now the main object of them was swooping in from above in all her glory. And on a fire-breathing dragon, which could prove dangerous.

"What's up with you, Hiccup?" she asked reproachfully as she clambered down from Stormfly. Her hair was tousled from the flight, her braids now half-undone, but she still looked fierce and beautiful as always, "What happened? You didn't evenâ€¦ Oh. Sorry."

She turned around when she noticed he was bare-chested, to allow him some privacy. But he simply finished up with his prosthetic and stood, tugging his breeches a little bit upwards so they wouldn't sit so low on his waist. He refused to put on his tunic and leather vest again â€“ he didn't want to melt with the midday heat so soon after getting out of the cool water, while he still felt refreshed. Embarrassingly, he noted he'd forgotten his smallclothes on the ground.

"Why are you here?" he asked, a bit more coldly than he'd intended.

"I was worried, you idiot. You and your dad yelled at each other, and then you just jumped and took off. You were so angry. And Iâ€¦" she turned back around to talk to him and noticed he was still shirtless, but aside from that small pause she made no comment or other movement, "I decided to come look for you. See if you needed someone to talk to. You know, vent?"

No. No, he wasn't talking to her about this messed-up situation. And how would he explain it? My father wants me to marry some girl from another tribe but I want to marry you instead, I think. Yeah, probably. That is, if you want to marry me, obviouslyâ€¦ but why wouldn't you? I'm not a bad catch, all things considered. Please be mine?

But the words wouldn't come out, of course, so all he could muster was a choked up "I'm fine."

"You're lying," she insisted, walking up closer to him until she was at arm's reach, "is it really that bad? You never get that angry, Hiccup. It's not in you. I mean, come on, you're a happy drunk! An uncommon trait in a Viking," despite the jest, the look of defeat on his face said it all; yes, it's bad, and I don't want to talk about it. He didn't need to voice it this time.

"Okay, I won't push you. It's a private father-son business after all," she said, one hand on her hip and the other flipping about in the air in a movement of dismissal.

A sketch of a smile faintly graced Hiccup's face, and he heard himself chuckle softly.

They absent-mindedly walked over to where Stormfly was grooming, and he noticed the Nadder had some travel sacks strapped to the back of its saddle. Astrid saw his confused look.

"I threw some stuff into the bags because I thought, you know, you'd still be up for theâ€| hot springs. You know," she shrugged feebly, a slender movement of her shoulders and slight tilt of her head, trying to sound casual about it.

He noticed the blush that had crept on to her cheeks, and he felt his own reddening in response. But his conscience tugged at him, and suddenly he was ridden with guilt. How could he go with her?

And to think he even had it all planned. He'd gotten his hands on a particularly thick and soft bearskin, even acquired especially scented candles from Trader Johann â€“ who assured him those were the latest novelties, and smelled as sweet as the freshest flowers, prone to make any lady sigh in delight. They'd better, considering their cost. He even had a new linen tunic to wear for the occasion, finely embroideredâ€| It was all back in his bedroom.

Some investment that was.

After what he'd been told, would he dare go? To another session of kissing, and caressing her arms, her shoulders, her neck, her back, and â€“ Odin forgive â€“ maybe even her thighs if the Gods were good to himâ€| he shuddered to shake off the gooseprickles, and shook his head in an attempt to scare the ungainly thoughts away.

But they wouldn't go away, and his over-active mind tricked his hands into remembering how her skin felt like, tricked his lips into believing they had her taste upon them, tricked his tongue into searching for hers. He licked his lips as an automatic response, unthinking, but she noticed it nonetheless.

"You're awfully quietâ€| what are you thinking about?" He suddenly decided the ground to be very interesting. He had definitely not been thinking about kissing her, not at all.

"It's nothing, Astrid. Really," but his gaze was still on the ground. Suddenly he felt like the kid who was always shy around his crush. Like those years of boosted confidence had seemingly gone down the drain.

"Okay," she said, in that tone of voice that suggested she wasn't quite buying it, "I just wanted to be of help. You weren't exactly acting like the Hiccup I know back there," she shrugged. She always tried to act like she didn't really care, but she did.

He knew she was concerned, and he appreciated that. In a way, he was glad she'd found him. But all the while, he was having a hard time having her nearby, conflicted as he was. He thanked her for respecting his privacy, and then they chose to sit under the shade of a large oak tree, admiring the landscape silently.

He loved that companionship between them. They could be around each other doing whatever, no words spoken, and yet it was almost always a comfortable silence, where they just appreciated being together without the rest of the group and theirâ€| wellâ€| loudness. However,

right at this moment it was really loud inside Hiccup's head, what with all the inner turmoil and the tug-of-war of his consciousness.

Like his mind was a battlefield, and none of the sides was anywhere close to becoming victor just yet; but there were already many casualties: his brain cells. Leading them onto battle, both yelling as loudly as possible were two entities, each clad in the finest armour Vikings had ever seen. Much finer armour than ever could be found in Berk, the kind of armour they produced in Lysminnae, the Isle of Wonders it was also called; and indeed it was wondrous. Hiccup should know, he had stumbled upon it while exploring, months ago.

The memories brought a smile to his face. He had hoped he could one day visit again, and he'd even wished Astrid would go with him to this exotic and welcoming place. As if on cue she broke the silence, shaking him from his thoughts.

"Did you bring your sketchbook?" she asked, hopeful and of course, unaware of Hiccup's wonderings. He hadn't, he'd forgotten to slip it inside his vest this morning before breaking his fast with the gang, so he just shook his head.

"Oh, that's too bad. I like watching you doodle," she said. He made to protest at her jape, but only grunted in amusement as she shimmied on closer to him, her head resting on his naked shoulder, her windswept hair tickling his back. And when her hand came snaking up to hold his, he just squeezed her fingers ever so gently and planted a kiss on the crown of her golden head.

Even though they were sitting on the solid ground, their hearts were soaring through places far higher than their dragons could ever hope to fly to.

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER

* * *

><p>So! There's that. I wanna do this according to perspectives, not necessarily a character per chapter but I'll go with the flow.
:)

Opinions? Mistakes? Anything you wanna say? Maybe send some candy my way? Please do!

Also: breeches are, basically, pants. Smallclothes are, well, underwear. And though men and women have different smallclothes, of course, the name was the same (if I'm wrong about it please do tell!)

As for "Lysminnae" - just some name I came up with...

3. Silver for your thoughts?

_What's this? have I decided to update? Yes, Yes I have. Lulz. I know the direction I want from this fic, but getting there's been a bit of

a hassle for me. So many stuff I'd like to do and asdhadhsiuahakjhd gosh!_

I actually rewrote this darn thin half a dozen times, but still feel like I wanted something else out of it. Meh, I don't know. I WANTED to describe a little bit of Astrid - because, come on, describing can be tons of fun - but something was making me wanna just jump into whatever.

But now, that would just seem weird in my head. So bare with me, will ya?

I'll thrown in some fluff, because that makes me happy and I had a bad day. Go fluffy!

(also, I tried toying with perspectives here...)

DISCLAIMER: I obviously own nothing. Well, I own my laptop...AND I OWN TEH INTERNETZ.

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><p>CHAPTER 3 - Silver for your thoughts?

* * *

><p>She was still worried about him, even though they sat silently under the shade of the oak tree in apparent peace of mind. He was being terribly defensive, and despite the chaste kiss to her head and the entwined hands, she could feel he was tense.<p>

And she didn't like it. She wished she could understand what he was going through so she could help him; she felt like she owed him that much. But even if he was unwilling to tell her, she could at least try to provide him with some support. It had grown into a sort of habit â€“ she would kiss him to reward him for whatever, or cheer him up whenever. She had a feeling they both enjoyed it equally.

Of course, right now a kiss didn't quite seem to cover it, but there were other ways to show support. She could be there for him, and she could show him she cared and that she was not going to pressure him (oh boy, but she wanted to). At this point in her life â€“ and in their relationship, she supposed â€“ she wasn't too concerned about feigning toughness or carelessness anymore. Not that she was going to be all sappy and soft for no reason, or overly romantic, because she did have an image to uphold. She was to be cool and calm and somewhat of a voice of reason, mature and responsible yet caring.

She would try, at least.

But then he broke the silence, suddenly, "Hey, Astrid. Silver for your thoughts."

And she thought **she** was the only one with questionsâ€| "Ask away."

He seemed to hesitate before asking, "why do you like me?"

What kind of a question was that? She punched his arm playfully, "You think too much, Hiccup," she told him as she pulled away to sit by

herself, plopping her head against the tree instead of on his shoulder.

And there goes calm and caring and soothing. Oh well, she had her ways.

"Well," he continued, mockingly rubbing the spot where she'd hit him, "I guess that sums it up then?"

"Of course it doesn't, you troll!"

"Well, you do hit me a lot," she interrupted him with a quick peck on his lips, "and then you do that, too, which I much prefer."

For a moment they smiled, and she noticed his eyes weren't really following his lips. She sighed.

"I don't know, Hiccup," Astrid said, plucking a daisy from the lush soil and twirling it between her thumb and index finger, "I just do. But why would you want to talk about that all of a sudden, anyway?" she asked, and then she added with a snort, "feelings_, of all things."

"Why not? Now's as good a timing as ever, I suppose," Hiccup said, ruffling his damp hair, "unless there's some sort of appropriate occasion for this kind of talk."

She sighed, "It's not like that, but justâ€|" I don't really know what to tell you I'm in love with you, I guess. But can't you already tell?

"Well then, next time remind me to book an appointment," he said, after an awkward pause, "or maybe we could invite the whole village and host weekly meetings. We could all talk about our feelings and braid each others' hairs, share some honeyed wine in the Great Hall."

Which, considering Vikings liked braids, was not at all an unlikely idea.

"Hiccup," she warned, waving her finger at him, "don't start with the jokes."

"Okay, fine. Fine," he replied, pulling his hands up in the air defensively.

"You know I wouldn't let any other girl braid your hair, anyway."

The playful tone in her voice caught him a little by surprise; so he laughed and relaxed into her outstretched arms, all the while fighting back that slight pang of guilt in the back of his head.

Go away, he told it, and leave me alone. But it wouldn't. Sometimes he really hated having a consciousnessâ€|

He felt her tug at his braid gently, and run her fingers through his moist hair. She massaged his scalp, and ran her fingers down his neck and between his exposed shoulder blades.

He felt gooseprickles all over when she raked her nails on his bare skin, and shuddered. She chuckled softly at his reaction, absolutely loving having so much of him unclothed under her touch; it made her slightly giddy to have that much contact. It still caught her by surprise sometimes, the way he would make her feel without even knowing it.

It made him feel rather lightheaded, too, and he would not have that. It's a strange thing, to want something so badly but at the same time knowing it's not supposed to happen.

Stupid social norms and people going by them. He wanted to be in control, instead of helplessly torn between what he should do and what he wanted! But should he not do what makes him happiest, even if it means going against what was expected of him?

He gently removed himself from her lap and stood, stretching lazily.

"Come on, we should go riding. Race you?"

"To the cave?" she replied hopefully, standing up with a jump. She loved the cave, and really wanted to go there. He couldn't blame her â€“ he'd been excited to go too, butâ€!

"Um, actually, I don't think today's a good idea. Maybe tomorrow, or after," and then he quickly added, "I'm sorry."

Oh boy. He was doing a bad job keeping his face casual, he knew it.

"Why not?"

And now Astrid wasn't even bothering to conceal her disappointment. Arms crossed over her chest, her right eyebrow riding up her forehead and almost disappearing into her golden hair, her lips set in a thin line.

"My dad," Hiccup had to say something, "he said he had some stuff to go through with me tonight. It'sâ€! uh, complicated. I really don't wanna talk about it. And I've got work this afternoon too, so it'll be hard to squeeze our date in, so..." he finished off lamely.

Astrid wondered if that was the reason he was so upset. His dad wanted whatever it was with him tonight, so they would have to cancel their plans. But couldn't he have said so earlier? This was strange. Something was definitely up, and she would get to the bottom of it. It wasn't like him to keep things from her.

"But we'll go, right? Before you leave?"

"Sure thing Astrid, we'll go. Don't worry." He felt like he should bite his tongue.

"Promise me," she said stubbornly, eyeing him as he grabbed his tunic from the ground and pulled it on.

He wasn't looking at her when he said, "Promise."

â€"

When they returned to Berk from their race it was well past lunch time.

They were lucky enough to arrive nigh unnoticed â€“ they just knew everyone would try to poke their noses into why they were away for so long, alone. Fishlegs did cross their path as they made their way to the village plaza, but Astrid dismissed him with one "go-mind-your-own-fucking-business" look.

Hiccup and Astrid parted somewhat awkwardly, despite their seemingly cheerful moods.

Astrid ate her lunch in silence and tended to her chores before heading out for practise axe-throwing during the late afternoon. She needed to let out her mild irritation somehow.

Before long, the tree trunk she'd chosen as a target was gnarled and chopped and her axe's blade was covered in sap. In her turn, Astrid was covered in sweat, rivulets cascading down her forehead and her back, sliding between her breasts and making her leggings stick to her thighs.

Enough of this for today. I'll look for Hiccup and have him sharpen my axe.

Now, that would soothe her some. Every now and then she did enjoy watching him work around the forge, and bringing over her own material was a good excuse to linger there.

Hiccup would usually be too busy to notice how her gaze would become riveted to him as he hammered away in the forge. Especially at night, when the contrast between the darkness and the orange flames of the hearth would outline the steady rhythmic movement of the tug-and-pull of his muscles underneath his sweat-glistened skin.

He was now into the habit of wearing shorter sleeves in the forge, or sleeveless tunics â€“ or no tunic at all during warmer days, for that matter. Thank you, Freyr, for the warm weather.

She had been particularly enthralled on one occasion, as he pushed at the largest bellows that existed in the forge. The device was so large he had to put most of his weight into making it work, so the resulting series of fluid movements of his torso, the flex of his abdomen muscles and the sway of his hips made Astrid think about him working the same rhythm â€“ but under different, erm, circumstances.

She had blushed furiously and excused herself to catch some fresh air outside, wondering when she had ever become so interested in those sorts of things. At first she would scold herself, but eventually figured that, well, she couldn't stop them, and she certainly wasn't going to speak to Gothi the shaman about them. It wasn't a malady, she was sure. It was most likely a common thing.

And she did wonder if Hiccup had the same kind of devious musings. In fact, she hoped he did; it would somehow make her feel better about herself if she knew he she wasn't alone in this. Besides, it would make her feel somewhat **smug **about it.

But Hiccup was not at the forge — she left her axe with Gobber and apparently nowhere else to be found. Neither was Stoick. Disenchanted, she made to return home, but glanced over at the sea. The sky was setting, so she decided to walk to the pier, sit down, and just drink it all in.

Sunset. Its orange glow seemed to glide gently over everything, as if just passing by; behind it trailed the night-blue darkness of eveningfall. The rim of ginger sky far ahead in the horizon seemed to envelop the centre of the sea with a bright warm halo, some of its color spilling into the deep blue waters of the ocean, mingling together with the waves until it became lost in the currents, giving way to the gloomy dusk.

Somewhere far ahead, she noticed some waves weren't quite waves, but dragon wings. A pack of scauldrons, perhaps.

She headed out home to help prepare dinner, dragging along slowly, occasionally glancing over to the Chief's house. But she didn't see Hiccup anywhere.

I'll go look for him tomorrow, she told herself.

After dinner she cleaned up the cooking area and headed to her own little corner. Now that her sisters were out and married, she had all the more room for herself and her thoughts.

She was lucky enough to have a separate chamber all for her own; most Viking households had only one or two divisions, except for the richest ones — and theirs was not one of those. Still, she had her own space inside, and tonight was particularly thankful for it.

Hiccup's question got her thinking—

Astrid was, as a child, always seen as the ideal Viking female. Tough, somewhat uncaring; even cold and distant, some would say. She trained hard and long, she was her own self-critic, she was always eager to learn and perfect her arts with the axe, her weapon of choice. Not a very feminine weapon at all, but she'd favoured it — and as an added bonus, it made quite the statement.

Astrid is so driven, people would say in admiration.

As she grew into her teens, so did her skill. Her mother, Big-Boobied Bertha, actually decided she would let her daughter favour the battle arts over the household tasks. She liked the distinction, even when her elder sisters teased about how bad she was with cooking and sewing.

But tough and uncaring as she was, driven and focused always on her task — perfecting her battle finesse — something happened that changed everything. Just a little, gradually, but then it grew into something much, much greater.

She had never been one to provoke, or mock or disdain, so she never joined the rest of the kids whenever they decided to poke fun out of Hiccup. As long as he did not get in her way, she saw no need to torment the poor boy further.

She would only get upset and snap whenever he proved to be a nuisance.

But thenâ€| well, then, dragon training happened. She grew suspicious of him, and eventually found out his secret.

And after that very first flight, she grew fond of him; actually fond. For years she had no idea what exactly had happened. Now, a woman grown, much more aware of the implications of gender differences, she knew.

That first flight triggered some emotion that had been completely foreign to her. It was not lust, nor physical attraction for that matter; it wasn't even love â€“ they'd been so young. No, she understood that what made him different from the rest also made him amazing, and incredible, and one-of-a-kind.

That made her see him for the first time, and she was completely enthralled by this witty, kind-souled person. He was intelligent, brave, loyal. He was courageous and a strategist, and also bold and willing to take his chances. He was all that, and even the boy's sarcasm had grown into her, now an endearing trait from her perspective.

No, not a boy anymoreâ€| He'd grown. They had all grown. But he changed the most, all the while remaining the same. The same sense of humour, the same spirit of loyalty and kindness; yet more intelligent each passing year, more dutiful and mature.

Less accident-prone, which was a big hand-out. And now he could wield a sword.

She never thought that seeing him as a warrior would change any of her feelings toward him, but somehow it did. She could never compare him to the other Vikings though, because he had that extra special something, that uniqueness that made him more than just another smart-alec youth.

How would a sword change that? Well, for starters, it helped her realize they were not children any longer.

He may not be the finest swordsman out there, but â€“ despite his prosthetics â€“ he was quick and even somewhat graceful, much to everyone's astonishment.

Hiccup, proving everyone wrong once again. He makes people learn, and even grow humble. Not a trait many could brag to possess.

But even if he wasn't the strongest out there, he was the most skilled when it came to dragons, and that was entirely a source of power in and of itself. He could fight, and plan ahead, and wasn't as rash and reckless as the others â€“ a Viking strategist was an impressive thing to behold.

And, indeed, impressed she was with every new discovery she made about him.

Sword fighting made him appear manlier, even more so than the shade of thin beard now lining his lower jaw. And while he may not be the

buffest youth out there, he had developed lean hard muscles within his slim frame.

Big-Boobied Bertha wasted no time when she noticed her youngest took an interest to the boy; one day she finally commanded Astrid to learn how to properly tend to a household.

Actually, her mother was seemed pleased about it! Astrid had heard two of her older sisters' conversation one day, when they had come to visit â€“ it was then she understood her mother had always thought Astrid would never wed. The day she noticed how well she and Hiccup got along, the Hofferson matron believed it was time to prepare her youngest for the probability of marital life after all.

At that point Astrid had ambushed her sisters, yelling, "I'm never getting married!" but they simply reprimanded her for eavesdropping, and then giggled like they knew something she didn't.

But she still learnt to cook and sew, to clean house and tend to wounds, and worked to perfect those skills nearly as diligently as she had fighting. No matter what, Astrid was still a very, very committed personâ€!

Even if she now wasn't the one-hundred per cent hardcore, I-don't-care-about-you, distant, only-focused-on-training girl. She actually acknowledged what it is to **be** a girl, thanks to Hiccup. Well, a woman.

Not that she was girly by any means, but all the newfound-femininity actually made her feel more confident with herself, more in control of thingsâ€; even if her hormones sometimes didn't want her to be in control.

Sadly, now she felt like she didn't really have a hand on anything.

What was going on with Hiccup? She needed to figure it out and help him, if possible. And why was she having problems voicing out what she felt? It was silly, and irrational, that she would display affection through her actions but not through her words.

Relationships are so confusing sometimes, she told herself as she pulled on her night gown and slid under the fur blanket. I almost feel like **I'm** making myself confused with all of this. I really shouldn't be upset at him because it's not really his fault, it's just...

She needed to drop that subject or she wouldn't be able to rest, so willed herself to sleep â€“ tomorrow she would have to rise with the dawn â€“ but her mind was filled with things. Some were mundane, some were not, and some of them were focused on him, on her, on them.

Astrid fell into a troubled sleep at first... But then he came to soothe her in her dreams.

She felt a searing fire in her belly, strange but delicious at the same time. She was nowhere, and everywhere at once â€“ and she was naked. It could have been summer, spring or winter; she could have

been in her bedchamber or out in the mountains, on a snowy field or even inside the natural saunas in the mountain cave.

But she was never alone, and never cold. Hiccup was with her always, as bare as she was. They moved together, and the temperature would rise with every touch, every shiver and kiss, even though she could not say in detail what they were doing to each other ¯ or even if they really were moving at all. Everything was a vivid blur, a calm turbulence, a serene ecstasy. it was light and dark, soft and hard, and everything else at the same time. Whatever it was, it was simply _good_.

Just before dawn finally came, that fire blazed so hotly that it woke her up, short of breath and disoriented, thrashing under her bearskin covers, slick with sweat and something else.

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER 3</p>

* * *

><p>All done! Some Autor's Notes:

*** Freyr** is the Norse god of fair weather.

*** **Yes, I made up siblings for Astrid. xD this is fiction, after all. And I wanted to. So yeah.

*** **Vikings didn't exactly use money or coins, but usually they carried valuables such as silver (which they would cut into pieces according to the value of their purchase). Hence a "silver" instead of a penny for thoughts. :)

Speaking of which... silver for YOUR thoughts? Review with your opinions, even ideas or suggestions, corrections, blah blah blahson. Makes me happy to have feedback, ya'll.

Huggies for your buggies!

And fret not. As I said, this will be coming along at my pace... and the beat's about to pick up. :p

4. Act like a shieldmaiden

Here's it is, next chapter! I was sort of disappointed for getting little feedback last time, but then two anonymous reviewers wrote like a review for each chapter in the same day, so I was like, "Hey, that's sweet!"

So thanks to everyone who reviewed and read. :) although I prefer when I can reply to you guys!

_Anyway, be warned: this chapter is not a fun-packed block of text. It's kind of heavy, and a little angsty I suppose...? which usually isn't my style, but seeing as though the situation at hand is a little dramatic, I thought it called for some moodiness. __Plus, it kind of matches how cranky I've been feeling lately, haha._

Also, I like to explore a character's insecurities, even when they think those insecurities don't exist. We can all become very fragile and irrational when it comes to the people we love.

Enough chit-chat! I'm babbling!

****DISCLAIMER:**** I don't own anything. Boo!

EDIT: __had to do some minor edits of a couple of typos that were irking me, lol. If you see any mistakes, please go on ahead and point them out (and try to pinpoint where). Many thanks!

* * *

><p>CHAPTER FOUR: Act like a shieldmaiden.

* * *

><p>The Chief of The Hairy Hooligans sat at the table in his house, silently watching the fire burn out in the hearth, his lunch half-eaten and getting cold. Gobber was keeping him company while he waited for his son to come back home, even though company wasn't quite something the Chief really needed right now.<p>

Stoick half wanted to yell, half wanted to hug his son. It was a weird concept for him. In his own mind, Stoick believed Hiccup was now a man grown and had to take upon certain responsibilities, and keeping the peace was one of them.

But on the other hand, Hiccup was still his little boy. Still clumsy, still sarcastic, smart as always, and inventive. Always helpful and kind, always curious and stubborn.

He wanted to scoop the man-boy into his arms and make him little again. He wish he could balance that freckled, auburn-haired little lad on his knee once more, tell him the great tales of their ancestors all over again, give him his first wooden sword one more time, or watch Valhallarama brush the giggling toddler's hair until it became untangled... It seemed so long ago now.

Oh, Valâ€| what have I done to our boy? I hate to have to put him in this position, but what else can I do? What would you do?

"Stoick," Gobber said, breaking the long silence.

"Mmmmm," was all the reply he got.

"Yer gunna hurt yerself, thinkin' so much."

"I'm fine, Gobber."

"Yer not fine, Stoick," his friend said, using his fake hand â€“ where he had attached his favourite drinking mug â€“ to push a cup of mead towards the Chief, "an' tha's totally understandable."

"It's Hiccup I'm worried about," the burly viking replied, slanting deeper onto the table.

"Ya haven't slept well in days. Ya need to be on yer toes. Think this over again."

"It's his **future**, Gobber, his future," Stoick vigorously rubbed his face in his enormous hands, but that did nothing to wipe off the sad look and tired eyes, "and his future is my future also. But I can'tâ€| I can't risk another war. Not now."

"Maybe ye don't havta," Gobber said, sipping from his cup, "there's always that _other_ option â€“"

"I won't go there, Gobber, I've told you."

And before they could exchange another word, the door to the house slowly opened with a loud creak, to reveal his son standing in the doorway, a determined look on his face.

"Dad, we need to talk."

That was Gobber's cue to leave.

"Well, I'm goin' off terâ€| ya know, mind ma smithy an' all that. Busy day, gotta change ma hand, look at the time!" He said as he slipped â€“ more like gravitated â€“ around Hiccup and left through the door, closing it with an even louder squeak.

"That door needs some oilin'," Stoick just wanted to make conversation at this point.

"Yeah."

A chilly silence settled between them as Hiccup moved to sit at the table across his father, his back turned to the dying fire. Hiccup was the first to talk.

"How can you do this to me, Dad?"

"There doesn't seem to be a choice, Hiccup. I either respond to them in their terms or they attack."

"And the Bunkerheads, of all of them!" Hiccup said, flailing his arms around in the air, "Couldn't you have found a lovelier bunch of bloodthirsty folk? Might as well just toss me straight into Hel's pits."

"They're a powerful and rich tribe, and could prove a valuable ally!"

"They're rich because they plunder and steal! They're really setback, Dad, even for Vikings. They believe chopping a man's head off makes them smarter," he said with distaste, "but I mean, how many headless men does it take to make a Bunkerhead smarter? Nobody knows the answer, because they're still idiots! **And** they still hate dragons!"

"They have weird traditions, I know that," Stoick insisted, "and we'll have to change their minds about the dragons, son. If anyone can do it, I know it's you."

"How, dad? They don't listen to anyone. Why would it be any different this time around? I've tried before, and it did **not** go well," Hiccup made a face, certainly recalling when he and Toothless had

tried to prove to the Bunkerheads that dragons could be trusted. They had nearly been skewered.

"I'm betting they only want this so they can force us into using our dragons for their warmongering," Hiccup concluded, rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers.

"Son, this time they want to make sure dragons are not a threat. I'm sure they've become more open-minded since last time," Stoick fidgeted with his moustache uneasily, "an' we all know Athole wants power and status, son."

"And how'm I gonna help him with that?" his son rose from the table, nervously pacing around the common chamber, an inquisitory brow raised, "with my mountain-sized muscles and amazing prestige?"

"Don't play dumb, boy. You know wha' they call ya out there," Stoick said, sweeping his huge hand in front of him to emphasize his point, "Yer the 'Dragon Conquerer'."

Hiccup scoffed at the title.

"Talk about role-reversal. It kind of looks like they're about to conquer me instead, huh?"

"An arranged marriage is not the end of the world, Hiccup. You'll learn that in the future," but truthfully Stoick didn't believe his own words.

"What future, Dad? This is definitely **not** how I imagined it! It's like everything I wish I could do with my life is about to come to a short drop and a quick stop."

"Nobody is going to hang you, son. An' trust me when I say this isn't what I wished for you either, but life goes on â€" "

"Then why does it feel like there's a rope tied around my neck?" Hiccup thrust his hand to his neck and gave it a slight squeeze, "The Bunkerheads made it, and you were the one who threw it at me."

"Ye got it all wrong!" Stoick bellowed, punching the table so mightily the wood splintered, but he took no notice, "That rope's not tie around yer neck! It's in yer hands, son, and it's pulling Berk away from danger!"

"That's not true," and by now Hiccup's stare was locked towards Stoick, "I feel like it's going to put us through more danger than anything else. Because you know they're only after power and titles, they're conquerors, the bad kind of conquerors, and Odin knows whether they'll keep to their word or not! So why put me through this? Why riskâ€|" the young man looked around frantically, as if searching for the right word, but he only groaned in frustration instead.

He saw his son slump down on the floor and cross his legs, now facing the almost faded fire, poking the few hot coals around. He mussed his hair, a habit he'd grown into. Stoick almost didn't hear him when he spoke.

"I'm in love, Dad!"

These words weighed down on Stoick so much that he needed to sit back on the bench. He didn't even realize he had stood up.

Fact is, Stoick already knew " for a very long time, and it didn't take a detective to see it " that the thing between his son and the Hofferson girl wasn't just a youngster's crush. It bloomed and it grew, and nowâ€| here they were. And Stoick had done nothing about it.

No, not nothing. He had actually encouraged it, turning somewhat of a blind eye to their little moments and escapades, even dropping a few hints and incentives now and then. Hiccup was a young man, after all, so he thought it was healthy for him to have someone romantically close " and it gave him some absurd sense of pride in his child. Any Viking man wants his male offspring to be successful with the ladies, though there was always somewhat of a danger factor in courtship.

But this wasn't the case. Stoick remembered when Astrid's parents suggested they bind their children through contract, because they seemed like they would want to be together. It would make them happy. It would be safe for them. So they made the offer.

It would be safe indeedâ€| By Thor, Bertha Hofferson was right. She was right, and we had no idea. But I decided to wait. I didn't want to force it. I postponed it. I did this.

Stoick rubbed the back of his head and exhaled deeply. He needed some fresh air and a long walk, probably even a few more gallons of mead.

"Let's talk outside, son. We'll walk to clear our heads. There's somethin' I need to tell you, but I can't in here."

-_o_-_o_-

That night, Hiccup couldn't sleep at all. He dreaded the dragon training in the morning " he was supposed to meet up with the gang in the arena to test out some flight formations for aerial combat " but he was petrified about meeting with Astrid again.

He needed to try to avoid her, for both their sakes. Until he felt ready to tell her the ugly truth, if ever he could muster it.

When he finally rose from his bed in the morning, he felt more anguished and exhausted than ever. Even putting on his clothes was a task. His father's words kept replaying in his mind, and he couldn't shake them off.

His stomach was too tight for him to break his fast before heading out. The day was colder today, and he welcomed the slap of cool summer air on his cheeks as he and Toothless rode together out in the skies. The loud whistling of the wind in his ears did nothing to distract him, and the flap of Toothless' large wings brought him no comfort.

They had killed one of Berk's envoys just to make a point, his father had told him the previous day while they walked together in the

woods. They'd sent the man's head back in a bag, with a dangerous threat inside. They were in peril, and there was no denying it.

Sure, they had dragons to fight them if need be. But they were a very large clan, well-armored, rich and powerful. How many losses wouldâ€¦?

No. No, stop it. Concentrate on landing smoothly right nowâ€¦

Of course, he was the first to arrive. Fishlegs appeared soon after, followed shortly by the twins and Snotlout â€“ who had apparently been woken up by the Thorstons in a very rude and sudden way, and was trying to catch up to them.

Hiccup sighed as he oiled Tootless' saddle; it was going to be a long morning.

They were all gathered inside the dragon-training arena. All of them, save for Astrid. That was terribly odd, because Astrid always arrived earliest, even sooner than Hiccup, or they'd come to the arena together. But Hiccup tried not to let it bother him, since it was better for him to get things ready without having to have her distracting presence nearby.

By the time Hiccup had finished going around to explain the order of their aerial formations â€“ and how they'd do them if Astrid didn't show up â€“ Snotlout had already properly woken up and was excitedly telling the tale of how his last mischief.

"â€¦ And then she comes out of the river and realizes her clothes were **gone**, " Snotlout waved his beefy arms about in the air above his head, "and she runs around naked and screaming! Man, you should have seen it," he hollered, doubling over with laughter, "her tits were like jumping up and down when she ran, it was awesome!"

Fishlegs seemed uncomfortable, but Tuffnut hooted along happily. Ruffnut just rolled her eyes, barely concealing her twisted smile, and punched her brother on the arm.

Hiccup unenthusiastically watched them argue and squabble around. He clearly lacked patience for these types of ramblings at the moment. A fleeting thought of throwing on his specialized riding gear and going off on another lone trip crossed his mind briefly.

"Okay guys, guess Astrid's not coming. Come on, let's get it on with," he announced, "before Ruffnut becomes twin-less. Actually, that wouldn't be all that bad â€“ "

"Fuck off, Hiccup," Tuffnut grumbled, spitting out a little bit of fresh blood. Ruffnut seemed pleased with herself as usual.

"Well, if someone tells me I 'fight like a girl' again, I'll feel honored," he mumbled. "Okay gang, ready for liftoff. Follow my instructions to the Tee!"

And they were off.

With years of practice, they'd gotten much better at flying with

their dragons. But it was still somewhat hard to get everyone to make the perfect moves. Meatlug was too slow and heavy, Hookfang was slightly less unruly but still wild, Barf and Belch was beingâ€¢ well, the usual uncoordinated move now and then wasn't all that bad.

Astrid. Hiccup truly enjoyed racing with her, teaching her new techniques for flight or dragon-combat. Practising with her was greatâ€¢ should he do it ever again? After he was married to that stranger, should he still get along with Astrid?

Wouldn't it be dangerous?

Absurdly, he envisioned them being forbidden lovers, running away together under the cover of the night's darkness to have their romantic escapades, while his wife â€" which he imagine was going to be a horrid-looking girl with a foul temper to match â€" sat home alone and drank herself to a stupor.

He was quite distracted with the idiotic thoughts, so he didn't even realize Astrid had caught up with them. And when Fishlegs appeared by his side yelling into the wind â€" announcing her arrival â€", Hiccup was so startled he almost fell from his saddle. Consequently, he twisted his prosthetic foot on the wrong position, causing Toothless to slightly lose balance and jab the tip of his wing on Snotlout's face, who screamed and made Hookfang turn around and collide into the twins. Astrid started yelling at the lot of them while Fishlegs only whimpered around and cried his apologies to Hiccup, who told him to fly the fuck away or he'd tell Toothless to shoot a fireball at him. In the meantime, Astrid had to go and rescue Tuffnut from falling into the sea.

Down below in Berk, some of the townsfolk observed the Defenders of Berk and their spectacle, pointing and laughing and poking jokes.

When they finally landed in the arena, Hiccup was far beyond irritated. He was genuinely pissed, especially because he knew it was his own fault he wasn't paying attention.

"What was wrong with you Hiccup?" Snotlout demanded angrily, still groping his nose, "don't tell me Fishlegs scared you!"

"I was distracted, okay? I was thinking!"

"Well, if you did less thinking and more flying, maybe we wouldn't have nearly died!"

Hiccup sighed. His cousin could take the crown of all the drama queens sometimes.

"Snotlout, if **you** did any less thinking you'd be sheep droppings."

"Say that again!"

"Girls, girls, you're both pretty," Astrid interrupted, and Hiccup winced at the sound of her voice, "but you're making my head ache with your babble. Hiccup said he's sorry, he just has a lot on his plate right now."

"Speaking of which," Tuffnut smirked, "You wouldn't happen to have been his main course last night, huh?"

That earned him a mighty punch to the face.

"Next time, I swear I'll let you fall, Tuffnut," she bristled, flicking her blonde fringe with her hand as if she hadn't just brutally punched someone with it.

"Not that I have to explain myself, **but** I, uh, had a bunch of stuff to do at home before I could come over here," she said.

"So you fell asleep?" Fishlegs asked, immediately regretting it under her dagger-filled stare.

"Astrid needed her beauty sleep," Ruffnut teased.

"I'm guessing it's Hiccup's fault. Did you keep her up all night? Because â€“," Tuffnut began, but Hiccup and Astrid cut him off immediately with a synchronized "SHUT UP!!"

Much to the others' amusement, both Hiccup and Astrid had a tinge of dark red splattered on their cheeks. The others all snickered as they tried to unsuccessfully disguise the change in color.

"Well Astrid, I don't think you need any beauty sleep," Snotlout said tentatively, in his usual wannabe-seductive fashion. Hiccup was about to argue with his cousin when Astrid spoke up.

"Drop it already, Snotlout. It's like you keep forgetting I have a boyfriend and that I did not choose you."

Hiccup's heart dropped to his feet. How could he resist this woman? Even knowing what he knew, it would be a struggle.

"Well, I don't get it," Snotlout protested, deflated, "how come you see him?" he pointed at Hiccup "as the better alternative over me," and he gestured to himself with his oversized arms and hands.

"Trust me: even if Hiccup wasn't around, I'd never consider you as a personal choice," Astrid placed her hands on her hips in that pose she liked so much.

"Ooooh, burn!" Tuffnut exclaimed.

"We'll see who's burning when I sick Hookfang on you."

"Everyone's having a go at me today," the male Thorston complained.

"Okay, you guys, how about we wrap it up on formations for today?" Hiccup said. He had no patience for this anymore today, none at all.

"How about a race?" Fishlegs suggested, excited, and all the others nodded. Hiccup took one long look at Astrid who, oddly enough, discretely avoided eye contact. There was a pink tinge on her cheeks again.

"You guys go on ahead. I, uh, need to take care of some things at the forge before I meet up with my dad, soâ€|"

A lame excuse, but he wanted to get away. He needed to. He should find the courage to talk to Astrid, but he needed to plan his words carefully first. He needed to brace himself, and the sooner the better.

He didn't see her again that day. Sure, he was trying to avoid her, but she didn't come looking for him either. The craven in him felt somewhat of a relief, even though he wanted to understand why she was being evasive.

If only he knewâ€|

The thing was, Astrid hadn't been able to get over that vivid dream she'd had. Even mundane chores reminded her of something to do with him. It was embarrassing, and she hoped that by staying away for a little while she would go back to normal. She felt like blushing just by looking at him, and for some absurd reason she was now somehow afraid he'd be able to read her mind or something like that, so she went about her business and left him to his.

Must be that time of the month coming around. She was regular, and always had a feeling that on the week before her Moon's Blood she was somehow more needy, but this was getting a bit out of control. One night of raunchy dreams was enough, she didn't need the following day to feel awkward.

Thankfully, that night she had a dreamless sleep, and the next day she felt fine. No weird and embarrassing thoughts, no inconvenient desires. But she did feel like hanging out with him; she liked the time they spent together, even if it was just for the opportunity to tease him for his new inventions and ideas (which, secretly, she actually found more interesting than amusing).

After going down to the market to fetch some supplies for her mother, Astrid decided to check if Hiccup was in the forge with Gobber.

Come to think about it, Hiccup was also sort of avoiding her. Wasn't he? Maybe it was all in her head. He had been busy, after all.

She was surprised to see the Chief at the forge, talking to Gobber in hushed tones. She wasn't the one to eavesdrop, but she heard them mentioning Hiccup in the conversation and wound up finding herself walking very, very slowly towards the smithy.

"It's going to have to be today, Gobber. We must tell everyone to meet at the Common Hall."

"Ya think he's had time to talk to the Hofferson girl about it, Stoick?"

There was some clanking while Gobber lifted a crate and searched for some tools in it, so Astrid was unable to pick up part of the conversation.

"â€| and even if he hasn't, I need to announce the wedding offer, Gobber."

The words were so shocking to her that she didn't even manage to listen to anything else. All she could hear was the rushing of her own blood leaving her brain, and the frantic pounding of her heart inside her ribcage.

What was the meaning of this? After her head stopped spinning she was beginning to think about barging in, but by then another customer approached the forge. She turned around, trying to pretend she wasn't eavesdropping, trying to keep from dropping the basket of groceries on the floor, and sprinting around to look for Hiccup.

She walked in the fastest pace she could muster, all the while wracking her brain over what she'd just heard. Wedding offer? Hiccup? And her?!

And Hiccup was supposed to tell her somethingâ€¦ were they getting married and she had no idea there was a contract? She never thought her parents would sign one without even consulting her. She thought they had more respect for her than that!

And Hiccup.

She had no idea what she was going to do with him when she found him, but she knew she could get creative in a moment's notice. He hadn't told her anything! Was that why he was avoiding her?

"Have you seen Hiccup?" she asked Fishlegs, who happened to be passing by in the town square at that moment.

"Nope," he replied airily, "haven't seen him since yesterday."

She asked about him to a couple more townsfolk, but nobody seemed to have seen him today. He better be hiding out. It was the smart thing to do.

It was nearing lunch time when she finally remembered she still had the grocery basket to return to her house, so she made her way back with sombre determination. She felt like she wanted to rip the ground asunder with every step she took, her breath uneven and shaken. She wanted to yell at her parents and scream bloody Hel at them.

So when her mother came strolling through the house, ready to take the groceries from her, Astrid basically dropped the basket on the floor of the chamber, a part of its contents falling on the ground.

"Astrid!" her mother exclaimed, "what's the meaning of this?" Astrid had **never** disrespected her parents before. She felt somewhat rebellious at that exact moment.

"You tell me," she growled, leering at her mother's towering figure. Her father sat at the bench in the corner; he paused from sharpening his knife and looked at her.

"Explain," came his low rumbling voice from the back of the common chamber.

"You didn't ask me. You didn't talk to me about it," and she was surprised to notice her eyes stung ever so slightly. She felt

betrayed and offended, because they went behind her back.

"About what, child?" her mother enquired, still confused.

"I'm NOT A CHILD, mother!"

Her father rose from his spot and walked slowly toward her and her mother.

"Then explain yourself properly, like a woman would."

"The wedding contract," she breathed out, the thoughts rushing through her mind haphazardly and spilling from her mouth, "You should have told me about it."

Her parents fell silent and exchanged guilty glances between them. Oh, yeah, now they feel bad about it. Sure.

"We're sorry, lass," her father said, much to her surprise.

"I wish things would have been different. Maybe if we'd offered soonerâ€|"

Sooner? That made no sense. But she didn't want sense now, or apologies. She wanted to just be mad, and that was that.

"Maybe you could have talked to me about it. That would have been different," she spat, unimpressed by their apologetic looks.

"We tried, dear, but the Chief said we'd wait. To give you both time to grow more," her mother seemed really saddened, "but we thoughtâ€| Nay, we knew that if ye had to bind yourself to anyone, t'would be the Haddock boy."

"We didn't mean for this t'happen, child."

Her father wasn't really the type of man to offer comfort. This did not sound right.

"Mother, Father, I'm not saying you'reâ€| not rightâ€| about that," she blushed, "but I deserved to be consulted on this matter. I mean â€" "

A mightily loud horn boomed in the background. It was a summoning call for the tribe's folk to gather for news.

Was the Chief announcing it now? Without summoning her and her family to stand before the witnesses? Where was Hiccup? Something odd was up. Her stomach tightened; she left her household in a hurry, ignoring her parents' calls.

The horn boomed again, making her stomach clench even tighter and her heart jump uncomfortably.

She appeared in the Town square just in time to see Gobber blow the horn a third time, yelling, "Your Chief commands you to gather in the Great Hall!"

He disappeared inside the enormous doors, followed by a crowd. She tried to push past them, but there were so many villagers already

inside.

In the centre of the Great Hall, Stoick stood next to his son "when had Hiccup returned?" who kept his eyes on the ground the entire time.

Astrid couldn't force herself to push forward anymore. She sensed something was off; she tried to read off Hiccup's face, but he never lifted it.

When the bulk of the village was gathered inside, Stoick spoke up.

"My clansmen, and women! I have an important announcement for you all," he spoke in a voice that carried all the way outside of the Great Hall, but it was not a voice filled with emotion. No pride, no happiness, no enthusiasm. Nothing. Blank.

"My son, Hiccup," he boomed, gesturing his arm in the slumped young man's direction, "is to be wed."

The crowd cheered. They whooped, and clapped, and some called loudly for a feast, clanking their mugs on stone and wood. Astrid felt anxious; she should be there next to Hiccup, with her parents beside her. Why weren't they?

She felt so lost, so confused. The people around her noticed she was there, and as soon as they did they too fell as silent as she was. They knew something was not right. Everyone knew about her and Hiccup.

She held her breath, nervously.

"In order to guarantee an alliance with the Bunkerhead clan," he proceeded, and this time Stoick's voice seemed genuinely hollow, as if he was announcing someone's death. The cheering died down almost abruptly. Nobody was clinking their mugs anymore. She saw Hiccup cross his arms in front of his stomach, as if he was bracing himself; eyes still downcast.

"Hiccup will be marrying Bergthora, daughter of Chief Athole 'The Blister' of the Bunkerhead clan."

Astrid couldn't tell if she'd gone suddenly deaf, or if there was a total absence of sound. But one thing she could tell "she had been stabbed, and the pain was so sickening she feared she might retch in the spot. The room closed in on her, and suddenly it was much too hot to allow for breath.

Someone strong held on to her just at the right moment; she had become so light-headed. She vaguely noted it was her father. He shook her, then, and her hearing returned.

She could hear hushed voices. She could hear some indignant cries. But, mostly, she could hear the pitiful comments from the people surrounding her. She looked around in confusion. Perhaps she was still dreaming. Reflexively, she put her hand to her chest to check if there was a dagger lodged in her heart, but there was nothing showing on the outside! she felt it there, though. In her.

Somewhat dazed, she let her father lead her outside the Hall, where it was thankfully cool. She could hear the crowd, they seemed to be demanding explanations. She wondered if they were rooting for her, or something similar.

Her father shook her again, "Snap out of it, child!"

And she did. She snapped out just in time to hear Hiccup calling out to her — he must have seen the commotion around her and went out to meet her. He called her name, and she heard his steps — a sharp metallic clank, a soft thud of his boot — getting closer and closer.

Her reflexes kicked in then, and she spun around just in time to deliver an earth-shattering slap to Hiccup's face. She watched him loose his balance, slightly pleased that she'd caught him off guard and sent him reeling to the ground. She hoped it would leave a mark.

No time for words. No need for them, either. She flew down the stairs of the Great Hall, stifling the unwelcomed tears misting her eyes and mentally kicking herself for having such a — such an un-viking like reaction. She was no tame, soft maiden of the non-viking tribes. Only those weak foreign girls from the East would ever react the way she had; it was embarrassing to have shown such weakness and vulnerability with her people watching.

Never again. She was Astrid, the cool and collected young warrior, who kept to herself and cared for no-one. She was a person who focused only in her goals, nothing else. She was a shieldmaiden, and would act as one. She would leave no room for self-pity, and would not tolerate it from others.

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER

* * *

><p>Poor Astrid! And poor Hiccup! I'm so vile... Now what?

Thoughts? Reviews? Gummy bears? :)

5. Blister in the Sun(shine)

Hello my lovelies! First off, thank you for the reviews. You guys rock my socks and make me wanna DO MORE, ya know? Motivation, inspiration, whoo!

Also: this chapter (and the next, at least) have some, erm, foul language. Hope nobody's affected too badly by it. This is rated T, after all, but I don't know if the language I used can push it to an M yet. Don't think so, but we'll see.

_Let us remind ourselves that they ARE Vikings, and though the Hairy Hooligans seem somewhat gentil, some other ones were most certainly not and we all know how foul some people could/can be, right? Anyone

here also into Game of Thrones? Just for a contextualization purpose, I mean._

_There. I ramble again. Oh, I used a quote from the books that I thought was wonderful. Props to whoever picks up on it.
;) _

DISCLAIMER: I just own my kitty cats. No, not own; I house them and feed them and clean them, hence I'm their slave and I love it. Because they're fuzzy.

Also, if you pick up on any typos let me know, though it's helish to pinpoint them in long texts... :p

* * *

><p>CHAPTER SIX: Blister in the Sun(shine).

* * *

><p>Somewhere far from Berk, a girl sat with her back to the window of her chambers, her fingers mindlessly but skilfully guiding the needle and thread to form a pretty pattern on the silk shirt she worked on.<p>

Vikings did not usually admire the delicate things, but she did. The girl was completely unlike her father, who was crude and brutal, while she adored the sweetness of a fresh flower's fragrance, the touch of soft fabric on her skin, or the sound of a young child laughing.

All the nice things her father did possess were because of the message they shouted to the world "I'm filthy rich!" and not because of their beauty or comfort. He loved his blood-stained leathers the best, but lavish fabrics and expensive gemstones were a way to make a statement, in his opinion. And most of them he'd ripped from the dead bodies of their previous owners.

Vikings admired combat skill, strength and size, bright blue eyes, long blonde hair. She had none. Under the sunlight, however, her hair may appear almost yellow; but it was only a light chestnut color, dull and lifeless, brittle as her health.

Her father would often make rude remarks about her hair "No suitors'll ever care for that mop on yer head, I'm tellin' ya. Best mind that. Lucky ye were born from yer mother, she's lot kinder 'an me. Get out._"

She'd always known, since she was very little. Her father hated her hair, hated her frail figure, hated her brown eyes and her kindness and her womanhood. He favoured his bastard son best " strong, healthy, as mean and unkind as he was.

But his bastard son would not lead their clan unless he got his little sister out of the way. She would sometimes fear for her life, and she knew that her mother " whose strong inheritance from the Bog-Burglar islands protected her from her husband's wrath " had prevented that from happening.

But now Mother is sick, and I am to be killed unless I am wed!"

Her father's unkind words often replayed in her mind:

"_No suitors'll ever care for that mop on yer head._"

Yet her father was wrong. Someone did care. Someone liked her hair. And her eyes, and her cheeks, and her smile, and her kindnessâ€!

But she was not free. She was her father's property, to do as he saw fit. She was promised to another; a stranger for whom she held no love. Nevertheless, she must play her part, or live no longer. She was good at it, at masking her feelings â€“ years of beatings under her father's immense hands had taught her the art of deceit well. She would not show emotions.

However, whenever she was alone, she would cry freely. And now she cried; for herself, for her mother, for the man she loved.

The loud cringe of her chamber's door being opened startled her. It was her mother, telling her it was time. It was time to move away to that other island.

She was never to see her mother again â€“ with her health so deteriorated, her mother could not withstand any voyage. She was never to see the face of her beloved. But if fate showed her any kindness â€“ and she prayed to Wyrd (1) every night for the chance â€“ she would also never have to be subjected to her father's cruelty again.

She would be free.

Even so, as she bid farewell to her mother the tears streamed from her face in single lines, droplets falling from her chin onto the silk; and while they were suspended in mid-air, in that fraction of a second before they landed and softly shattered, the sunlight reflected in them like tiny round diamonds.

* * *

><p>Back on Berk...</p>

Hiccup felt like crap. He was in the disposition to loathe every fucking thing. He loathed waking up. He loathed eating breakfast. He loathed having to greet people when he stepped out of his home â€“ and by greeting, I mean he vaguely nod his head at whoever spoke to him.

He loathed the word loathe, and even the fucking warm weather was making him want to curse the Gods.

He only looked up to look at Snotlout when he passed him by. His cousin's eye was healing decently; it wasn't swollen anymore, and the bruise seemed less gruesome. According to Fishlegs â€“ Hiccup had not been present at the time â€“ the immediate day after the Chief's "grand" announcement, Snotlout once again tried his luck with Astrid by asking her if, now that Hiccup was taken to another woman, she would finally succumb to his charms.

Obviously it was his eye that succumbed to her fist instead, and apparently it took both the twins and Fishlegs to stop Astrid from

dragging Snotlout by the legs and throwing him off the docks.

The moron had a death wish, for sure.

Hiccup lightly touched the cheek where Astrid's had hit with God-like force the week before. More agonizing than the physical pain, of course, was the emotional one. It was not so the impact of her hand, but that fraction of a second when, after he hit the ground, he saw the disappointment plastered all over her face.

She felt hurt and betrayed, and he could relate to that. He understood.

He still blamed himself for it, and his father for not allowing him more time to set things straight. He wanted to have taken Astrid out to somewhere discrete and explain everything properly; how they were in danger, how he wanted to protect the peace, and her life, and just how much he loved her and always would... that, mainly.

He didn't tell her how he felt. That was the worst part.

Six days had passed since the announcement. The Bunkerhead clan's representatives had arrived since two days. They had already set sail when Stoick first told Hiccup about the engagement; they would have come to Berk anyway, whether there was to be a wedding or bloodshed.

And so the overall mood in the village was dreadfully somber. The relatively peaceful Hairy Hooligans were very wary of the Bunkerheads, and the first night had not helped at all. Those people were brawlers, and mostly drunks, so there were a few incidents â€“ two bar fights, and a barmaid was ravaged.

It wasn't normal for them to be fearful in Berk. And in their own homes, of all places. But these were unwelcomed folk, and very hard to deal with. They were stronger in numbers and were armed in a multitude of fine weaponry, and under the command of their leader Athole, they held the allegiance â€“ or rather, the fear â€“ of two other viking tribes.

It was a battle lost before it could even start. Everyone knew it, and in a way every citizen in Berk seemed to understand the implications of a denial. They had somehow been caught in the cross-fire of a war they didn't really want to be a part of; a war for the power to rule over the Barbaric Archipelago.

To even believe that there could ever be a man to rule such a miscellaneous bunch of Norsemen was nothing short of delusional in most sane people's minds, but there was no stopping a fool with a purpose. Especially a powerful fool.

In the end, Hiccup convinced himself he could not blame his father for all this. As a Chief he did the best he could. Yes, Stoick could certainly call for other allies as well â€“ the Merciless Meatheads have been clashing with the Brawling Bunkerheads for generations now â€“, but most were far off and would never reach them in time, should a battle ensue.

There was nothing to be done. So Hiccup resigned to his fate and let go of the idea of being happy with Astrid. The rest of the

Bunkerheads would arrive within the following week, with his bride — he loathed the idea of her, too — and her despicable father to attend to all the formalities.

"A Chief must show no fear, no worry... A Chief is a leader first, and a man second," his father had told him once.

Hiccup needed to be a leader — it was his duty by blood and honor toward the people of Berk, as future Chief of the Hairy Hooligans. So he was to be wed within the fortnight.

Or he would be dead, if he followed his heart.

* * *

><p>Astrid grimaced on a regular basis now. In the two weeks since the announcement was made in the Hall, she could not find a reason to be happy about anything.</p>

She knew her parents were concerned for her, but concerns would not fix anything. No, the trick was to move on ahead and push away any Hiccup-related event that could be considered remotely romantic. Or any Hiccup-related event, period.

The rollercoaster of emotions she had felt in the days that followed the event ranged from heartbroken, to profoundly sad, to resolute and ruthless, to miserable and forlorn, to angry. Very much angry.

How could they have betrayed her? Her parents, who had suggested a marriage agreement to the Chief without consulting her; who found out about the counter-offer from the Bunkerheads and told her nothing. The Chief, whom she used to regarded with respect and admiration, had also cheated her. Hiccup, for obvious reasons, was the worst.

With their actions and omissions they all led to that one, extremely humiliating event. And she would not be humiliated again, or allow herself to mope over someone who'd shown so little regard toward her feelings.

She set her own goals. Do not talk to him. Don't cry over him. Don't think about him. Concentrate on yourself, on getting better and stronger. Love can't grow in this Gods-forsaken world, so don't waste your energies with it. Be free of any man, you don't need one to be happy. You'll always be a shieldmaiden, and nothing else. No husband, no one to be tied to. Freedom and battles is what awaits, nobody can take that away from you.

But at night she was vulnerable, and would often break the promises she made to herself during the day. She would cry, and sob, and sigh. Sometimes she would even clutch her pillow, hoping it would somehow morph into him. She would dream of days past, of kisses and caresses once shared, and in her dreams there was nobody else but them.

"I'm telling you, girl, I'm your typical lovestruck teenager," she sighed that one misty morning as she brushed Stormfly's spikes and scales with her hands. It was the day the main Bunkerhead vessels were supposed to arrive. A welcoming committee was to be arranged, and obviously she wanted to be as far away from it all as possible.

She often thought of going rogue, of leaving Berk and offering her battle skills somewhere else. After all, what was left for her there? Her parents, whom she'd lost faith on, and the reminders of a love torn so suddenly?

She played around with Stormfly's saddle for some time, wondering where she would go. Maybe to Bashem. They seemed amiable enough. But the road ahead was far, and she would need supplies, maybe even some of Hiccup's specialized riding equipmentâ€¦

There he goes again. Slipping into my mind one more time. This needs to stop. I need to get over him. I need to let go. I need to **go**.

Maybe this whole event would prove useful to her after all.

* * *

><p>Hiccup's palms were sleek with sweat. He was anxious and nervous. His stomach churned for the umpteenth time.</p>

As he stood there in the docks, the itchy ceremonial clothing nearly forced onto him, all he kept wishing for was that the monstrous main vessel would vanish from existence.

But it didn't. It just kept getting closer and closer, growing from afar in the horizon, creeping in like some ominous Changewing readying to spit its venom. The sea ought to swallow them. The Red Death ought to rise from Helheim to destroy their whole stinking fleet. Thor ought to strike them with ten thousand lightning bolts. Him and the rest of the gang â€“ heck, the rest of the village â€“ ought to ride their dragons and set them all on fire.

But no such thing. It just docked, unscathed and huge, and the plank was lowered - out came the monstrous-looking Athol. No wonder they called him "The Blister".

His face â€“ what was visible through the mane of messy black beard â€“ was full of them, some red ones and some white ones mingled with dozens of scars. Some of those were battle scars, the others were craters left behind by the disgusting eruptions. Not as large as Stoick, or as tall, but menacing all the same.

What a sight to behold, indeed. Hiccup wonder if the girl would take to her father. Not that it mattered to him; he didn't care about what other girls might look like. He was in love with the one.

Hiccup watched everything like he was far, far away. He wanted to detach himself from what was happening at that moment, and for that he created his own little world in his head â€“ even if it was just for a few fleeting moments.

As his father and the Chief of the Brawling Bunkerheads exchanged cold greetings (and there were some nasty quips from Athole, Hiccup remotely noted) he pictured the man would have an anvil dropped on him. It would be Astrid, riding Stormfly, to drop the weight.

When the abhorrent man approached Hiccup to greet him, Hiccup very much wished Toothless would show up and drag the man from the dock and into the sea, to drown him. But Toothless was hidden away, so as

not to make this whole crap of an event worse than it already was.

The dragons would be introduced later on, after things had quieted down.

"So this is yer boy, Stoick," The Blister said, his voice dripping with disdain, "he's a lo' prettier than my Bergthora, tha's fer sure."

Hiccup must've made a face then, because the man's noisy laughter was followed by a remark that really proved he was as hideous on the inside as he was on the outside.

"Dun' worry mah boy," The Blister flashed his deformed, rotting teeth at him. Probably drinks his mead with too much honey, "she's got sum nice titties fer you t'play wif, so ye won't get bored lookin' at her nasty face. Ye can shove a bag o'er her head fer all I care!
BERGTHORA! WHE'RE YE AT!"

A girl came stumbling from the docked vessel's gangplank, followed by a hefty young man who patently resembled Athole â€“ same greasy hair, same scars on his red oily face. Probably his bastard son.

She was clad in a saffron-colored dress, heavily embroidered with gold-spun thread. It was not a modest dress; it clung tightly to the girl's frame and dipped deeply at the neck, revealing a heavy cleavage adorned with an intricate gold necklace littered with an assortment of gemstones. Despite being summer, she wore her sleeves long and heavy, a brocade of delicate white lace erupting lavishly around her hands where her sleeves ended, and around her cleavage line.

The most striking thing to notice about her was that she did not look like she was even remotely related to the repugnant man who fathered her. Her skin was pale white, transparent almost, but it was spotless as a starless night.

Hiccup did not find her beautiful. He could not. He did not even care for that. He **did** notice, however, that she was not gruesome as he had thought she might have been. Her chestnut hair was loosely braided and decorated by several small pearl beads, and a headband made of solid gold rested across her forehead, a ruby the size of a thumb proudly sitting at the center of it.

Her eyes were small and brown, heavily laden with thick eyelashes, and her thin lips were very pale. Hiccup wondered if she was sick from the trip, because she looked so whitish; it was such a contrast from her lavish, warm-colored clothes.

In fact, he now noted, the three of them were all very well clothed and very much adorned with jewelry. It was common for a Viking warrior and tribal leader to wear clothes like that; he looked like a mainlander from the East. Even Athole's garments were made of rich fabrics and had several different brocades, and his armor was made of the finest materials. It glistened in the sun, oddly glossy, clearly over-polished.

Such an enormous contrast. He'd never met an ugly man so vain; he'd never met such an ugly man either, for the record.

"So!" The Blister rumbled, and the way he spoke made Hiccup's innards twist, "quite them knockers 'ere, eh? Ah c'mon, ye dun' havta be shy! Ye can feel 'em up if ye want ter."

And he finished with a loud boom of a laughter, the rest of his men joining the uproar. The girl squirmed uncomfortably, her eyes shifting about everywhere, her shoulders tense. No color rose to her cheeks, however.

"She's playin' the maiden now, boy," he proceeded, and Hiccup just wished that disgusting blighter would shut up, "but she can be quite the vixen."

Another roar of laughter from the Bunkerheads in the background.

"An' if she's not pleasin' ye," Athole came uncomfortably close to Hiccup's face, so much so that he could smell the man's pestilent breath, "just ge' yerself a nice concubine wif a nice tight cunnie. Heard ye already have a pretty wench â€""

"That's enough, Athole."

Hiccup was **never** so relieved to hear his father's voice, because he could feel himself growing redder and angrier by the moment.

Again the low, rumbling laughter from the crude leader of the other clan. It was amazing how easily this man seemed to laugh, although his laughter seemed more prone to trigger a gag reflex than a smile from someone else. But that might have been his foul stench, too. Fancy clothes cannot mask so much corruption.

"Beggin' ma pardons, Stoick _The Vast_, " he said, pronouncing the cognomen with a hint of mockery, "yer absolutely right. We have terms ter discuss, you and I. And a feast to prepare; I brought me favorite cooks n' foods along, and plenty of the finest wine and sweetest mead ye ever tasted, wif enough honey ter feed us all fer months t' come. Tonight, we CELEBRATE!"

Roars, cheers, laughter from their crowd. Except for Bergthora, who stood as silently and stiffly as everyone else from Berk, her expression completely blank.

They made their way from the docks, and all the while Hiccup's eyes scanned his surroundings in hopes of catching a hint of Astrid; but she was nowhere among the crowd. There was little unloading to be done, because the Brawling Bunkerheads preferred to sleep in their own ships rather than in one of Berk's inns; and for that everyone was thankful. Nobody wanted those vile people sleeping among them.

Gobber tried to comfort Hiccup as they made their way to the Great Hall, but to no avail.

The meeting was long and exhausting and Hiccup could not stand another one of Athole's offensive, foul wisecracks. Even with Elder Gothi present he was relentless. The bride-price was set, and it was a hefty one; Stoick and Athole squabbled over the outrageous amount

of silver Athole was demanding for the mundr, but they settled for half the initial amount, four cows and a full set of fine battle equipment.

Athole even wanted details set on the morning-gift; much to Hiccup's anger he wanted to have Toothless included with it. They managed to convince him that a much bigger and stronger dragon (well, Athole didn't need to know about the Night Fury's superior strength and speed) would be most fitting; and on top of that, Toothless was injured so he needed special equipment in order to fly. So now Hiccup needed to train a Monstrous Nightmare for his bride, and teach her how to fly.

She looked positively terrified at the concept for a brief moment, but regained her composure rather quickly; a silent, stony demeanor, eyes always cast downwards. It unnerved Hiccup. Was she mute? Her bastard brother seemed to do enough talking for the both of them though.

And as for the bride's dowry, well, let's just say she would be well-supplied with fine jewelry and fine clothes for generations to come. And Athole was offering slaves, too; a concept most unwelcome in Berk, so it was refused.

"We do our own work here, Athole," Stoick affirmed, "an' I'm sure she'll have no problem finding people willing to help her with whatever she needs."

"Suit yerself. As for th'rest, it's not like I need 'em anyway, them clothes n' them jewels," the Blister boasted, "Yer mother ain't getting new ones, she's as good as dead wif 'at sickness of 'ers. An' me concubines'll settle fer anything, 's long as they 'ave this," he grabbed at his crotch and made a lewd gesture, in case anyone needed some help figuring out what it is he meant.

Hiccup's stomach flipped unpleasantly and he glanced over at Bergthora, who did not even seem to register her father's words. He felt a sudden pang of sympathy; it must have been horrible to grow up with a man like this. He really couldn't blame her for being so reclusive.

Finally the negotiations were settled, and everyone went about the preparations for the night's feast. There was a lot of cooking to be done, and a lot of organizing too; and obviously there was a slight sense of dread lingering about, because a feast with free drink and food with the Bunkerheads was not likely to be free of trouble.

Hiccup would still need to wear his fancy ceremonial clothing to the feast at the Great Hall, but all he wanted to do was head home, rip the fabric off his skin and burn it. And maybe take a warm bath â€“ even though he'd had one this morning â€“ to rid himself of the ickness he felt. It was as if Athole's corruption were seeping into his skin, which bothered him tremendously.

He needed to find his best friend and go out for a ride. He wished he would never have to come back to this hideous joke that fate seemed to be playing on him. The Gods have a wicked sense of humor, indeedâ€| they ripped the woman he loved from his grasp and gave him a glass of poison instead.

Oh, Astridâ€œ you haven't talked to me in weeks. Every time we cross paths you won't even look at me. You won't come anywhere near me. It hurts.

He needed to run away from all that, but there was no comfort or relief in anything he did or saw anymore. So maybe he **would** go for a spin later on. Enjoy some of his last moments of freedomâ€œ No. Not his last. That girl would be no boss of him. He would still fly away with Toothless to anywhere he wanted to go! He would not be bound by someâ€œ stranger.

Resolute, he descended the Hill and made way to his house, not wanting to have anything to do with the preparations for the feast, and very much willing to go as far from that despicable man as possible. He'd never encountered such a vile person. Maybe Alvin the Treacherous, but that guy wasn't nearly as creepy and prurient.

Inside his home, up on the loft he used as a bed chamber, Toothless awaited him eagerly. There was no way Hiccup would be able to exit his house with Toothless all the way down to the forge without being seen during the daylight, and he'd left most of his long-flight gear there. He'd been working on a few more improvements to his inventions lately, focusing on that rather than on all the sad events that had been occurring.

He would go for a ride while everyone was entertained with the feast. They probably wouldn't even notice him gone.

"Hey bud," he greeted the black dragon, patting his snout and chin vigorously, to which he replied with a friendly gurgle and gentle head-butts. Toothless was the last tether he still had to a life that had been happy only a fortnight ago.

Toothless shot him an inquisitive look, as if asking "how'd it go?"

Hiccup sighed deeply and sunk into his wooden bed, limbs outstretched and facing the ceiling.

"This is awful, Toothless. Just awful. All of this is happening, and I can't help being selfish," he used his forearm to cover his eyes. But the fabric seemed to itch on his skin, seemed to claw at him somehow, and that only made him more frustrated.

"I can't help wanting to screw this all to Hel and just be with Astrid," he said aloud, and then added in a little voice, all to himself, "I would start a war for her."

It startled him that he would even consider that option. Five years ago he had risked his life and lost a limb, trying to save the population of Berk from the Red Death. Now he thought of putting those same people at risk, for a chance to be with his beloved. There seems to be a huge contradiction here â€“ was this what love was all about? Putting your own morals at stake?

Toothless chortled, feeling bad for his human companion, and went to him to offer some comfort. Toothless had gotten so used to the concept of Astrid being his human's mate, that the whole idea seemed

utterly confusing. Humans were terribly complicated at times. Poor boy.

Hiccup waited in the house until it was nightfall; he definitely wanted to sneak away after the feast, so he lighted the oil lamps and readied his travel bag with his essentials for a night-long trip.

He packed some flint and his favorite fire-steel â€“ perfected by himself, of course â€“ and a handful of fine oak touchwood inside his leather pouch. He grabbed some salt-dried fish and meat strips from the main room downstairs, and filled his amphorae with fresh water. He set his preferred clothes on top of the bed â€“ he didn't want to wear those damned ceremonial garbs any further than what was required â€“ and his bearskin cloak, in case it got colder or he decided to fly above the clouds.

"Hiccup?" Gobber called out from down below; he hadn't even realized anyone had come inside the house, "It's time you join us at the Great Hall. Feast is about to begin. You alright up there?"

"Wait up Gobber, I'll be down in a minute," he called back, propping his travel bag on his bed. He joined Gobber downstairs.

"Was I away for too long? I couldn't stand another minute in there with thatâ€¢ thatâ€¢!"

"Atrocious creature?" Gobber offered, "Eh, sonny, I get you. I've never been able to stand the man, he's just the lowliest I've met. He talks much too crudely, there's no art in how he makes his jokes. And I like them basic ones!"

Hiccup knew that, and somehow a small smile seemed to pull at the corners of his mouth. When he was younger Gobber would certainly avoid making certain japes but after he'd turned seventeen, it was like a switch was flicked on. Sometimes Hiccup would be working and his ears would burn tenfold, not because of the heat in the smithy but because of Gobber's raunchy jokes and tales. It was all in good fun though, and never nearly as offensive as Athole's.

Gobber's good hand â€“ only hand â€“ came to rest on Hiccup's shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze.

"You know your father's just tryn'a protect us from a war, aye?"

"Yeahâ€¢" Hiccup said, but he wasn't so sure if a war really could be avoided in the first place. Or should. Whichever. Slight moral conflict here.

"An' you know, it's a luxury to marry for love in our culture. Especially in your position."

Hiccup was somehow startled that Gobber was even having this sort of conversation with him, but then again his mentor always had a way of catching him by surprise with the most delicate issues.

"Even so, Gobber," Hiccup replied, "I never thought I'd get into a mess like this. I thought I would have a chanceâ€¢" he swallowed, and the words seemed to catch on his throat but he forced them out, "to be happy, and to be with the person I want."

He balled his fists so tightly his nails started to dig into his palms.

"Instead, I'm being used as a trading coin to possibly avoid a war. We're not even sure if it'll keep us out, or if it'll or shove us into a bigger problem."

"Aye, but it's the right thing to do, Hiccup. Listen to me. I know your father told you about this," Gobber said, in his that tone he would use whenever he handed out delicate advice, "the alternatives aren't very good. You're doing this because we can't chance becoming a direct target to The Blister's wrath," Gobber let go of his shoulder and made his way towards the door, slowly.

"But that doesn't mean you should entirely give up on everything that made you happy," he said, stopping just before he closed the door behind him.

"Gobber, what are you trying to say?"

"I'm not sayin' anything. I'm just askin' you a question: would you truly fight for that lass?"

He left without awaiting a reply.

A very dazed Hiccup climbed back upstairs and looked around his bedchamber; Toothless lay on his rock slab, curled on himself. There were drawings and paintings everywhere Hiccup looked. Some were designs for new gadgets, or old gadgets, or for clothing and accessories he'd planned on crafting. There were various drawings of dragons, peopleâ€| and Astrid, many many drawing and sketches of her.

Now every time he looked at those drawings he felt a pang on his heart. There were dozens of reminders of her, and he knew he would soon have to hide them all away. No wife would tolerate her husband's hand-drawn pictures of the woman he loved, when that woman wasn't his wife. He quickly folded and carefully fitted his favorite into his travel bag; for that particular one she had actually posed for him, and whenever he looked at it he was taken back to that day and how happy they'd been.

And how beautiful she is.

He was truly trying to torture himself, because the last thing he decided to bring â€" and that one he took with him, tucked inside the inner pocket of his vest â€" was a lock of her golden hair. They'd given each other a lock of each one's hairs, to keep one another close while he was out on his exploring trips.

He smiled lovingly at the beautiful lock of hair, remembering the romantic moment with longing. He felt like he'd placed a ray of sunshine near his heart; no matter what happened, nobody could take those memories away from him. If everything was to wilt and wither, he could still remember those times.

Then he slowly, warily made his way out of his home and up the stony steps of the Great Hall, each climb a mountain of its own.

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER FIVE

* * *

><p>Well, that Blister guy is really ghastly, I know. He's supposed to be easy to hate. ;p

_Also, I don't know how I missed it several times (should have been written in chapter one, maybe I'll edit it), but I had planned that the name of the other tribe would be the _Brawling Bunkerheds_, only I kept forgetting to write the '_Brawling_' part every now and then. xD (can't keep writing it all the time, gets tiresome...LAZY, I know!)_

So... share your thoughts with me. I like it that some people try to guess what's going to happen, lol. :) and the more feedback I get, the faster I want to write! Next chapter ought to be out next week... Maybe!

(1)_Wyrd_ was the Viking's God of Fate.

6. Sucked in

Hello peeps, and welcome back to this... this, erm, figment of my imagination. Step right in, grab a drink or two, and have a Thai massage while you're at it.

Once again, mind the explicit language. We're not dealing with gallant knights in shiny armor here, nor innocent children/teenagers. Nope.

Mind the drinking too. And while I'm at it, mind the eventual violence and crudeness and the ridiculous number of times Hiccup can be surprised in just one night. But I bet the record can be broken eventually.

DISCLAIMER: if I owned anything, I'd be writing proper NOVELS filled with senseless SMUT and loads of LEMONS and hopefully I would be making money out of it, and not just satisfying my inner perv. Yeah.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER SIX: Sucked in.

* * *

><p>Once inside, Hiccup took a look around; dozens and dozens of torches burned brightly, clearly oblivious to the sadness he felt. The shadows they cast played tricks on his mind sometimes, and every now and then he felt a flicker of hope that one of the many blonde manes he saw belonged to Astrid. But of course, she was nowhere to be seen.<p>

He took his seat by the table, joining his father and Gobber, his bride (who had changed clothes and now wore a mauve dress with a red velvet cape, but looked just as stern as before) and her abhorrent

father. He wished he needn't be placed right beside his wife-to-be, but such was demanded by social norms.

He was beginning to hate the social norms with a renewed gusto.

The Great Hall soon filled with people, tables and tables full of rows of Vikings, but each group sat in separate locations; there would be no mingling between the two tribes, at least not until a large portion of the drinks were gone and their tongues and spirits were loosened enough.

They were firstly served a dish of lamb stew and cabbage, boiled with different spices and herbs (probably imported by that pretentious idiot), followed by roasted pork stuffed with peas and spinach. Both dishes were heavily drizzled, the first one in garlic pepper sauce, the other he could not identify, but both were equally savorless to him.

In fact, Hiccup only managed to eat a couple of bites of each dish presented, and only because he was obliged to due to his position as groom; everything tasted the same to him, and he swore that even the cheery music was getting on his nerves profoundly. However, he noted just how his own villagers were eating away avidly, so the food was probably great. He just didn't have the stomach for it.

Next came the trout and salmon stewed with mushrooms, onions and seaweed, and afterwards they served cod prepared with turnips and radishes.

He could barely manage to bite into the pumpkin and carrot pie, and had to adamantly turn down the honeyed apples and lemon biscuits. But he could skip the deserts, as it wasn't considered offensive.

The only thing he did consume in quantity was the wine; honestly it was the only thing that truly appealed to him that night. It was warmed with honey and foreign spices, and the flavor prickled his tongue and crept down his throat with a sweet, welcoming warmth. It made him think of Astrid's tongue dancing on his, and with each deliberately dragged out drought he closed his eyes and exhaled, relinquishing the memories.

His father warned him, "You've barely eaten, so take it easy on the wine, son." So Hiccup immediately poured himself another mug of wine and downed half of it in one swig.

"No need to worry Dad, see? You're right. This **is** pretty easy to drink."

Hiccup ignored his father's upset look, and focused his attention on tracing the intricate patterns on his mug. It was big and terribly heavy since it was made out of solid silver, and had very interesting carvings all over it, even on its handle.

That superficial prick brought four silver mugs for himself, his daughter, Stoick and Hiccup, because they were "fitting fer a king's feast". Hiccup wondered just how lavish the actual wedding festivities would be, and shuddered at the thought. Maybe he had brought solid gold goblets or something for the "special occasion".

Finally The Blister removed himself from the main table and went stumbling down to join his men in singing and drinking (more). It was a strange sight to behold; a cruel warmongering fiend, drinking and chanting with his men and laughing that terrible laughter of his, recounting tales of his adventures (most of them either violent or coarse, or both).

The unwilling groom sourly noted they were throwing food " and other things " at a man. It was the Bunkerhead tribesman who had raped a young barmaid recently. Athole had dealt with the criminal himself, upon request of the girl's family for vengeance. The rapist's tongue had been removed, along with his hands and the other organ he'd used to deflower the girl. The man still wore bloody bandages on his stumps, and it was obvious he was feverish; the wounds had not healed properly yet. He was being dragged around by an iron shackle at his throat, occasionally stumbling and falling over on himself " each time he did, laughter erupted from those tables where the Bunkerheads sat.

The whole grim spectacle disgusted Hiccup. Normally the price for forcing sex upon an unwilling maiden was that the two were compelled to marry, and the groom had to pay a hefty monetary price. But these were an unusual kind of Vikings, and anyways the girl's parents did not want her married off to someone of that unsavory tribe.

Still, Hiccup felt that it would have been better to just execute the man cleanly. Instead, he would eventually die from an infection " or from being so roughly handled by his own clan. It was a harsh kind of justice that they were not entirely used to in Berk. He hated that his father would even allow for such a thing.

What exactly was going on with this whole arrangement? Nothing seemed to make much sense to him anymore.

Hiccup only took notice that Gobber and Stoick had left the table after Bergthora nudged him with her foot beneath the table. He jumped at the contact, startled, and must have had a wild look on his face, because he heard her speak, "I just want to talk."

Or he thought he heard her say. Her voice was so low he could hardly hear it through the commotion. He leaned in closer, ever so slightly, and said, "Okay."

He wondered why she needed to wear such heavy jewelry. The golden hoops she wore reminded him of the bands villagers would dangle on their cattle's ears, and the strange, oddly-shaped thick amulet she wore above her " once again, wide " cleavage somehow made him think of that one time Snotlout had drank too much on a bet, and thrown up on Ruffnut's lap.

He did a poor job stifling a chuckle at the untimely memory, and saw her eyebrows knit together in mild confusion. They were too thin, and looked like worms to him.

"Talk," he said, maybe a little too brusquely. Not that he cared about her feelings.

She seemed to swallow back her words, seemed to struggle on whether she should get the words out. But eventually she spoke, avoiding eye contact as much as possible, always keeping her voice low.

"Do you hate me?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, drumming his fingers on the wooden table. They felt oddly numb.

"I don't know you," he said earnestly. And I don't want to get to know you, he wished he could add, but he held back his tongue. He still knew his manners, even if the wine seemed to want him to bugger them all.

She was now looking around the Great Hall, her mouth slightly open as if she'd forgotten what words to use. She spoke again after a few moments of what seemed like contemplation.

"I hate feasts," she confessed dourly, "the feasts with my people are always terrible. My father loves them. He loves it when people get drunk and start fighting. By the time I'm about to leave, it reeks of blood and piss all over the place, and there's women being shafted on the tables and on the floor, sometimes by more than one man. They throw copper coins at them, and one by oneâ€¢ theyâ€¢ sometimes they fight over the women, and even kill each others."

She took a sharp intake of breath and exhaled shakily, "you must think we're animals."

Hiccup was taken aback. He didn't quite expect her to speak like that, but far more troubling than her choice of words was the information she just disclosed.

He looked around frantically, feeling some sort of unease rising and a vague sense of dizziness. She seemed to know what he was thinking.

"Don't worry," she said, "they will behave tonight. Father commanded them to, because he says you Hooligans _don't_ know how to have fun_. "

"Fun?" Hiccup croaked, still baffled, "is that your people's idea of _fun_?"

He would have laughed, if the situation weren't so disturbing.

"That's madness, you know? Sheer m-madness! How can t-there be a complete lack of, of, of **control**? And decency and respect?" He stammered through his words, as his brain was reeling far too fast for his mouth to be properly coordinated. Gods damn that wine. Now he was concerned there might be something in the beverages, and he'd downed three and a half mugs of the thing!

He clicked his tongue, still tasting of the sweet wine, and sourly noted that he felt somewhat light-headed.

"I know that. I am **not** like them, believe me," she sighed, "and there are others whoâ€¢"

She paused. He noticed then that her hands â€¢ each finger was adorned with a golden ring â€¢ were clutching at the border of the table, as if she was about to fall from the skies.

"You said you didn't know me. I don't know you either, but I hope I can trust you with this. I've heard of what you have done, and I've heard of your father's deeds as well, I've heard of his honor and valuesâ€¦ Not from my father," she added, "he always speaks foul of everyone else."

She was talking so fast, and in such hushed tones, but Hiccup could still hear the determination and the anger in her voice rising.

"I heard from others, from men I trust. You are both **good** men," she said, stressing the word 'good' as if it were a prayer, "and I heard you love someone. A girl."

Now she was staring him straight in the eyes, her brown ones finally showing some emotion. He was feeling an emotion of his own, too, as Astrid crossed his thoughts.

"You leave her out of this. She'll have no influence â€“" he began, but she cut him off.

"I don't care about her," she hissed, "I don't even care to know who she is. But you do and you care. I'mâ€¦"

She paused when her bastard brother suddenly appeared at the front of the table, his chunky face twisted it what might have been a grin. He pretty much looked like a five-year-old had carved a mouth into a pumpkin with a blunt knife.

"Dearest sister," he slurred unevenly, "you do well, yes, work your charms on him. A woman has to keep her husband happy."

He waved an abnormally large finger to her face in an overly exaggerated gesture, and then turned to speak to Hiccup.

"Because if he's not happy, you'll get what you deserve little sister. Am I right, o ser?"

He'd pronounced the expression 'little sister' as if he was trying to spew venom from his mouth. Thor almighty, how could that man produce an exact carbon copy of himself? Some people should not be allowed to have offspring.

"No," Hiccup firmly replied, "I believe women should be duly respectedâ€¦ bastard."

Odin's beard, he was going to get himself into a fight. This wasn't like him. He didn't talk this way, didn't look for unnecessary problems and, in fact, usually the problems didn't need any help finding him in the first place!

But much to his surprise, the bastard son of Athole took no offense. He just laughed â€“ the same kind of terrible cackle as his father â€“ and lurched away, apparently finding the idea of respect towards women ludicrous. A chip off the old block, that one.

"You got lucky," she said, resuming their conversation as soon as her half-brother was safely distant, "he actually takes pride in being the bastard son. Thank you."

"He's a fine and caring brother, isn't he?"

"He would kill me in my sleep if he could get away with it. But this arrangement is much more convenient for them." Somehow, her statement didn't surprise Hiccup.

"As I was sayingâ€œ I don't care who it is you are in love with. I just care that you **are**, because it's dangerous. For both of you, and for me too."

"And as **I** was saying," Hiccup insisted angrily, "leave her out of this. I'll keep to my word."

"Words will not help. I lovedâ€œ I still love someone, too. He is not here, and was lucky his life was spared. He was shipped off somewhere, and I haven't heard of him since."

Wow. The day had been full of unexpected revelations but this must have been one of the biggest ones. And here he was, thinking she was just a washed-up girl without a mind of her own, and it turns out she's just as scared, lonely and miserable as he was.

He didn't know what to do or say, because she clearly looked like she was fighting back a wave of tears. She shook her head ever so slightly, her eyes now closed, and took another deep breath. It was probably taking all of her courage to say all of this.

"But I need to play my part if I want to stay alive. So I really hope I can trust you with thisâ€œ"

She leaned in dangerously close, her hands crawling up his shoulders, and whispered into his ear.

"There are people from my tribe who wish my father ill. They want him dead almost as much as I do."

He wished he could have more time to talk to her about that puzzling statement, but her father had suddenly climbed unsteadily onto a table and boomed, "BRING ME THE SACRIFICE!"

For a moment Hiccup dreaded Athole was going to split the throat of the rapist right there; that didn't happen, but he still watched grimly as The Blister killed the live boar, and saw the trail of blood that pooled onto the flagstone floor as the carcass was dragged to the middle of the Great Hall, to be skewered and roasted in the blazing heat of the central fireplace.

"BUNKERHEADS AND HOOLIGANS! Time for the toast! A TOAST TO THE BRIDE N' GROOM!"

People were now staring directly at the table where he sat so he and Bergthora were allowed no more further conversation, but his mind kept screaming at him to go talk to his father.

The booming voice seemed to reverberate in Hiccup's ears and he half-wished he was Thor incarnated, because he would have thrown the enormous dinner table at The Blister's head. Still, he pretended to drink his toast â€œ in reality he did not even taste any more wine, because he had already drank too much and was very wary of anything offered by that man.

"TIME FOR THE GAMES! TIME FOR THE DANCES! The _skalds_ will sing of this feast!"

The beat of the music picked up and nearly everyone stood from their seats, save for those too drunk or who were playing board games. People gathered to hear the _skalds_ sing or tell tales, others threw daggers at targets, others wrestled among themselves. A woman from the Bunkerhead clan approached the table and took Bergthora's unwilling hand, "Time to play _hnefatafl_, lass!"

At the same time he felt someone tugging at him as well, and it took him some time to realize it was Snotlout pulling him up.

"You gotta get up and mingle, cousin!"

Snotlout, you're drunk â€“ Hiccup wanted to say, but he immediately realized he was not steady on his feet as well, and he tripped on his prosthetic foot. He laughed, and it was such an unexpected laughter that he actually looked around to try and see if it really had been his. It must have been, since Snotlout had his mouth around another mug, Tuffnut was chewing on his own tunic, and his twin sister and Fishlegs wereâ€¦ What in Odin's name were they doing?

For the love of your sanity look away, look away!

That could not have just happened. Eugh.

Oh, wait. Wait, focus. You're not focused. You seem to be drunk. Test it out with a couple of steps. Okay, those worked. Now cross your legs andâ€¦

"Ooof! Sorry, 'Lout!" He'd crashed straight into his cousin, whose drink spilled all over his tunic.

"It's okay," he shrugged, "just come with, with me to get an-oother one. Ooorrrrr you can let me have some of your wine," Snotlout said, his eyes widening with anticipation.

"I bet **that** tastes great!"

"No, no no nonono Snoltloult, the wine's not, eeeeeeh," he tried to think of something bad to say about the wine, "I think Gobber threw up in my mug."

Despite that not making much sense, it immediately threw Snotlout off his mood for wine. He detached himself from Hiccup and huddled toward the nearest tankard of mead, much to Hiccup's relief. That mead belonged to them, the proud Hooligans, and not to the Bunkerbeds. Bunkerheads.

He reminded himself he had an important message to his father, so he went searching for him. He found Stoick sitting at a table with some other men from the Hooligans and, he realized after cranking his memory, some from the Bunkerbeds. Heads.

This was not good. It would seem strange if he were to pull his father aside now, and whisper the information. But he couldn't wait. He couldn't talk to Bergthora any further eitherâ€¦ He had an idea. He found Snotlout again â€“ he was hugging the mead tankard - and

pulled him onto his shoulders (but not without considerable effort).

"Heyyyy Hiccup, 'cuz," he gurgled amiably, "really 's nice of you, been meaning to go outside to piss. Buuuttt I needed some help, this flo-fl-floor's full of holes 'n it shakes. I wanna help too," Snotlout managed to croak, "You're so unhappy, 'cuz."

It was in moments like these that Hiccup realized Snotlout didn't really hate him. That was kind of nice.

He managed to slip unnoticed from the throng of people, and found himself outside of the Great Hall. Much to his satisfaction, the night would provide the perfect cover for him and Toothless — the mist had set in deeply, making everything seem fuzzy in the pale moonlight. That was good. He wanted to avoid the sentinels that had been planted since the Bunkerheads arrived.

He left Snotlout sitting against the wall of the Great Hall's front, half-asleep, and made his way down the stony steps. If the cool night air hadn't slapped some of his drunken stupor off, the insanely loud lightning crack definitely did. A thunderstorm was brewing — he needed to move fast.

He quickly got inside his house and wobbled up the wooden stairs to his loft, where Toothless greeted him excitedly. He patted his best friend's snot gently.

"I know bud, I know I promised. We'll be out soon, I just need to findâ€¢!"

He grabbed some paper and went to look for his writing stick. He looked and looked and couldn't find one. He even opened his chest and rummaged through everything inside it, but found nothing. He growled in frustration.

"Gods damn it! Where are all my writing sticks? Damn it, burn them all inâ€¢!"

That's right, he'd left them at the smithy. Stupid.

"C'mon, Toothless. You're coming with me now."

He grabbed his bearskin, his clothes and his travel bag and ushered Toothless out the opening from the ceiling while he took the stairs, meeting his Night Fury outside. They walked the path down to the smithy as carefully as they could, to avoid being seen by the sentries (whom he suspected had managed to smuggle a mead barrel or two from the Hall). With the help of the thick fog (and probably some tankards of mead), it wasn't a hard task.

He hid Toothless inside the main chamber of the forge, and urged him to be quiet as he entered his own workshop in the back.

Wow. He really had left the whole place a complete mess. Even his riding gear was out of place. He grabbed a writing stick and scribbled the message down on a paper, folded it and hid it inside of an empty leather drinking pouch. He would leave the pouch somewhere only Gobber could find it.

He heard Toothless warble.

"I'm coming, bud, I just need to change into my gear!"

He removed Astrid's lock of hair from the inside pocket of his vest, carefully placing it on his workbench. He stripped down from those irritating clothes and tossed them sideways, ignoring the tiny bumps that littered his exposed skin; he heard a muffled sound and some slight clanking.

"Toothless," he called out as quietly as he could, "stay still!"

He started getting dressed with the clothes he'd brought, pulling on his pair of riding-leather breeches. He put his short-sleeved shirt on, and then his long-sleeved green tunic.

He turned to grab his riding-leather. The brown leather shirt was tight-fitting across his chest and down his hips, but a bit looser around his arms, reaching down to his elbows. On top of that he secured his chest and shoulder gear, black leather he'd carefully sewn together at every stitch, a roaring red dragon painted on the left shoulder pad. He fastened his buckles expertly across his chest and stomach, and fit his gadget-equipped gauntlets on each forearm.

He pulled on his boot and grabbed his leather helmet, tucking it under his arm, and placed the lock of golden hair in the inner pocket of his vest. Then he strapped the small travel bag to Toothless' saddle on one side, and tucked the bearskin on the other side; then he hid the message for Gobber. Hopefully his mentor would find it.

He was about to leave when he heard a strange noise from the back. Toothless couldn't have done it, or he would have seen him. Was there someone in his workshop? Some Bunkerhead snooping around perhaps. He needed to check.

Hiccup grabbed a nearby sword and carefully made his way back to his workspace. He looked around, carefully this time. Then he noticed what was off "the chest where he kept his leathers and trinkets had been opened, and something was missing. A lot of stuff, actually.

He noticed something move in the corner, behind some piles of leather and wood he kept in the back. He approached that corner, sword steadily grasped in his left hand!

He was completely knocked out of his breath when Astrid jumped from behind the pile and landed square on his chest. Everything was a tangle of limbs and buckles and leather and spikes and clasps.

"Get. Off. Of. Me!" She wheezed.

"What? **You're **unf! " the one "hey_! " on toooop," and now he had just been kneed in the groin by his former-girlfriend-with-whom-he-was-still-in-love-with. Lovely. But he still managed to get up and follow her, and since Toothless was partially blocking her way he managed to grab her by the wrist.

"Wait! Astrid, please."

She didn't even look at him; she just threw some random item at his face — luckily nothing sharp — and yanked her hand away, somersaulting her way around Toothless in her typical display of acrobatics.

"Ow! What in Odin's Ghost, you flippin' woman!"

It took him some time to get back up on his feet — well, foot — and give chase. This time he put on his leather helmet, just in case she decided to hit him in the face again.

"Toothless, which way did she go?"

He followed Toothless to the docks, unable to see much in front of him because of the fog. They'd lost her for a while, until they heard a loud thump and a stifled scream.

"Astrid? Astrid!" He called, running toward where the sound might have come from. He was horrified to find Astrid pinned against the wall of one of the wooden structures in the docks, a large Bunkerhead holding her hands above her head with one of his, a dagger on his other hand. Hiccup knew what the man wanted from her. He signaled for Toothless to stay hidden, and took a few steps forward.

"Leave her alone," he said, his voice as steady and low as he could manage.

At first the bloke had seemed surprised, but then he saw Hiccup and laughed; he was easily three times his size in width.

"I found her first. I go first. You wait your turn, boy," he spat, apparently oblivious to the kicks Astrid was delivering to his ribs.

"I won't say this again. You let her go, or else."

The man swiveled suddenly, and in one swift move he threw Astrid to the ground with a loud thud, launching himself at Hiccup with his dagger raised in the air. He was too slow; Hiccup dodged his assault easily by leaping to his left side, and while the man was still trying to figure out where he'd gone to, Toothless' tail smacked him so hard in the head that he collapsed immediately. Toothless harrumphed triumphantly and sat on top of the man, ensuring he would not move an inch.

The skies flashed white and another low rumble resounded deeply, as if Thor himself were issuing a warning. The storm must really be nearby.

"Astrid! Are you okay?" Hiccup asked, kneeling by her side. He held out her hand to help her stand, but she just swatted at it, stood up and walked away.

"Just stay away from me, you hear?"

"Wha— are you kidding me? How about, 'hey, thanks for showing up'? That guy was going to —"

"He wasn't going to do **anything**, Hiccup," she hissed, bending down to the floor to pick up something she'd dropped. A leather bag. It was one of his, he noted, from the forge.

"I had it under control," she insisted, but the way her voice trembled suggested otherwise..

"Clearly. You're welcome," he deadpanned, the rush of fear and adrenaline he'd felt moments ago still making his breath shaky.

Was she really walking away? They hadn't talked in two weeks, he catches her hiding in his workshop at the smithy, she smacks him twice, he saved her butt (probably literally) and that was that? Stay away?

"Wow, hey, where do you think you're going?" He asked, making his way towards her, "Look, we need to talk!"

He never saw it coming until the man was right on top of them; it must have been another one of them, hiding out and waiting for the right time to jump at them. Hiccup reacted instantly and shoved Astrid to the ground, rapidly throwing his left fist into the man's face.

Hiccup heard a crunching sound â€“ probably the man's nose, or one of his fingers. Hopefully not the latter. Toothless didn't even have enough time to come near them, because sooner than that they were both rolling around on the floor, the burlier man's size playing to his advantage. Hiccup saw the man reaching for his dagger and instinctively tried to reach it first; he grabbed the hilt and pointed it upwards.

It was over in a moment, just as fast as it had started. Hiccup didn't even realize what had happened, but it was Astrid who'd managed to find an oar and slammed it on the man's head, causing him to lose his balance and fall straight unto the dagger.

He heard a sickening gurgle and felt the man twitch and go limp in an instant, before he rolled over and fell to the side. Hiccup crawled from beneath him as fast as possible, before the foreign blood could seep into his own clothes.

The three of them stood there, staring blankly at the corpse.

"W-what have I done!" Hiccup croaked weakly; the man's bloodied dagger fell from his trembling hands with an ominous clank, as if it were somehow offended that it had been used against its owner. He didn't even realize how he was still holding on to that weapon.

Toothless let out an alarmed warble and nosed at Hiccup, forcing him to stand up straight.

"Look!" Astrid said, pointing at some place in the mist; someone was coming, carrying a torchlight. They needed to move, fast.

Hiccup instinctively jumped on Toothless and eased himself onto the complex saddle, quickly shifting his prosthetic foot into the riding position and clicking it into the gear. He checked that neither of

his fingers was broken, fortunately, and fastened the security ropes to himself. He was going to tell Astrid to jump on, but she'd vanished through the doors of a nearby shack, reappearing moments later already saddled on Stormfly.

She took off without another sound, and he and Toothless silently vanished into the skies as well. Just in time; they could hear the voices getting closer and the torchlights becoming brighter.

Astrid was trying to fly away from him, and it was hard to keep track of her in the middle of all the mist; he didn't want to call out to her yet because he did not want to draw her attention. Toothless could smell her though, or so he hoped, so he flew blindly through the mist for a couple of minutes.

Another thunderbolt crashed nearby; and this time, it was really very near. Its brightness and the loudness of the sound almost threw them off balance, but during the flash he saw Stormfly up ahead. He asked Toothless to bring him closer to them, and when he was in earshot range he called out to her. Once again, she ignored him and he insisted, until he got positively fed up and urged Toothless to fly immediately next to Stormfly.

"What are you? Hiccup, go away!" She swatted at the air around her and nearly hit Toothless' front paw. "Leave me alone!"

"No!" he yelled back stubbornly, trying not to get tangled in Stormfly's wings, "This is a mess! This whole situation is a _fucking_ mess, and I **need** to talk to you!"

"I have nothing to say to you!"

"But I do! I just need you to listen to me!" He yelled back, and there was a sudden and violent gust of wind that once again threatened their balance. Visibility was dangerously low now; they were flying blind and could easily crash into a rock, plus the increasing wind speed was not helping. If not for his riding gear he would be soaking wet and freezing, as she probably was.

He'd never had kept up with his plan of flying off tonight with this sort of weather.

She suddenly banked left and tried to throw Hiccup and Toothless off balance, but the Night Fury kept its cool and maneuvered around her.

"Have you lost your mind?" Hiccup yelped, surprised by her aggressiveness. But then her voice changed into something much less fierce, something much frailer.

"No, **you** have! Just let go of me, Hiccup! **PLEASE** LET ME GO!"

And he did, by Odinâ€| he did slack his hold on the bridle. It was like the pleading, pained tone on her voice made his fingers go numb on their own accord.

Then the world flipped upside-down in a heartbeat. He should have seen it coming if he'd been properly focused; but it was all so sudden.

Toothless and Stormfly both screeched terribly at the same time, just as they sensed the danger. But by then, there was nothing either of them could do.

Another flash illuminated their surroundings and they saw it, the whirlwind in the middle of the sea. They tried, but couldn't fly out of it. It pulled them in with that pure force that only Nature possesses, and so both dragons crashed into one another.

Yet somehow, Hiccup managed to throw his arms around Astrid, and both held on to each other as tightly as humanly possible.

They were sucked into the vortex.

* * *

><p>Once again I'm playing with perspectives. I didn't initially plan to make a single chapter under ONE point of view but it just turned out that way.

I can't really tell if the chapters are long or short. What do you think?

Reviews and opinions are much welcome, and feel free to point out those pesky typos or errors.

NOTES:

(1) The skalds were their bards and would recite poetry and sing in feasts.

(2) Hnefatafl (sounds like someone just sneezed, lol) was a popular board game among Vikings, which translates into "King's table".

7. Words That We Couldn't Say

Here's the next installment of my little HTTYD plot-bunny-mind-cannon-imaginary-story-twist-thing ! That just made no sense! Ha!

Disclaimer: if I owned How to Train Your Dragon i'd be off in Tumblr drawing dirty smutty little pics of Hiccup and Astrid and pretending I'm just some rogue artist. Ha.

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 7: Words That We Couldn't Say

* * *

><p>"What in the world is that boy thinkin', Gobber?"<p>

Gobber sighed. He shook his head and he shrugged his shoulders and he placed his hands behind his back. He paced around some more â€“ he'd been pacing around Stoick's house all morning â€“ and he scrunched his nose into his moustache.

What was Hiccup thinking about, indeed?

"Well, Stoick," he said to his best friend and Chief, "you know he wants freedom above all else."

"He has duties. He knows them. We've talked of this and we agreed he would do what is best for Berk."

Stoick was firmly repeating the same thing to himself, as if to find reassurance in his own words that his son would ultimately choose to take one for the team.

Again.

"Ah, Stoick. You said Â«_we_ agreedÂ». He didn't volunteer, and he certainly was no' the one who made that choice by himself."

Stoick stood behind his chair, his massive hands clutching the wood so tightly it might split, as if he needed to hold on to it for support.

"He didn't want to marryâ€| Well, at least not yet," Gobber added hurriedly. He knew his apprentice better than his own father did â€" most of the time. But then again, who can really know what's inside of another's head?

"He complained about how you always went on about him settlin' and startin' a family and chiefin', an' all he really wanted was a chance to be himself."

"Ach, Gobber!" Stoick exclaimed, tired, "He's always ever just been himself. Different from the rest! Took us a while to see all the good that could come from him bein' that way, but still... Now he needs to become what the _village_ needs. Gobber, he's had time."

The blacksmith-turned-dragon-dentist gave Stoick a look. No, he hasn't. He could do with some more time.

But Berk can't.

"Don't think I don't feel bad about doing this to my son."

"I know you do, Stoick. I know. He wants freedom but he's tied to his position as your son and Berk's future Chief. You do well to remind him of his duties. But ye can't blame th' boy for wanting to get a little extra somethin' from his life before being chained away."

"A Chief has no chains tied to him, Gobber!"

"Well, tha's one way of seein' things. Your way. Hiccup's view on things is different and ya _know_ it."

Gobbed picked up the letter once again and re-read it.

"Well, we can be thankful we still have a few months to goâ€|" he paused and thought about it some more. Hiccup had written that he wanted to go out for a few days for some alone time, and they could just **say** he went to respond to an urgent call from the island of Glum to help with some dragon problems. It could be considered a diplomatic necessity.

He'd also written about an interesting information disclosed by Athole's own daughter.

He hadn't, however, said anything about taking the Hofferson girl with him. She and her dragon were nowhere to be seen, so they had concluded the obvious: they'd gone out on a trip together.

"Let's just hope he doesn't follow my advice!" Ya know, "pound it while it's hot!" If he brings Astrid home with a full belly before he's married, we "

Gobber fell silent at the sight of the reproachful stare he got from Stoick.

* * *

><p>Silence.</p>

Everything was one big blur inside her head. She couldn't tell if she was still airborne or if she was on solid ground, or even in water. Her senses were all jumbled up and her body was unresponsive for what seemed like forever. She couldn't see, she couldn't hear, she couldn't move.

She felt dead.

She was left only with a lingering wisp of fear, but of what she couldn't tell. She just knew she was afraid of something, but it seemed so distant she couldn't bother responding to it. She couldn't remember why, like in a dream we vaguely recollect.

The first thing she actually started to feel were the sounds; her hearing was returning. The sounds made no sense though, as they all came fumbling into her brain in a disorderly mess of signals she couldn't make heads or tails of.

Then the darkness shifted, slowly giving way to some sort of clarity. Gradually the light increased, and she remembered "she could open her eyes. But each eyelid was a task of its own and she had to will them into moving apart.

More light came into view; then she noted somewhat of a blur of color. Maybe it was blue, or brown or green, or everything mashed together. There were no shapes, just colors fading into one another.

The sounds became clearer. She heard birds. She heard waves. The sound of foliage in the wind. Her own voice, a mere whimper.

Then she heard a male voice. She didn't understand it at first, but the familiarity in it stirred her awake.

Hands. Someone's hands on her. She felt the dampness of her own clothes, but found that she did not feel cold at all. Quite the opposite; she was fairly warm. In fact, too warm!"

"Astrid!"

Hiccup's voice ripped through the haze that enveloped her. Her eyes

shifted into focus, her brain registered where she was. She saw his face " a scowl of concern morphing into a smile of relief " and green, green all around and above it. Hiccup was there, holding her in his arms, rocking her in his lap.

She was almost too groggy to be properly surprised by their proximity.

She needed to check if he was real, so she managed to pull her hand up to cup his cheek; his own hand flew up to cover hers. He was so **warm**. And so **close**.

An impossibly silly idea crossed her mind, and immediately her body responded to it. She wasn't thinking of anything at all, merely focusing on the impulses driven into her body by what she **felt**. Their lips connected like magnets, like they should never have been denied the actions of their own natural forces.

Now she could feel her heart was beating, and she knew she was alive.

And she remembered.

She broke the kiss suddenly, as all the memories came gushing back to her, and pushed him away with whatever strength her numbed limbs still had.

She sorely shimmied away from him somehow, and just slumped there against a tree. She took a sharp intake of breath and felt a numb pain on her left side. Every bit of her body seemed to be sore, especially her chest area. They must have landed hard. Where were they anyway? In a forest, from what she could tell from a quick look around. One that was wildly unfamiliar, but maybe that was just her fuzzy brain readjusting to the state of consciousness.

"Where are we?" she croaked, her voice sounding foreign to her own ears. She was **so **thirsty.

"I don't know," he replied, shrugging as if it didn't matter right now. She focused her eyesight on him. He looked exhausted. He had dark circles under his red eyes, his clothes were torn, and he had blood smeared on his forehead. She felt the guilt and concern bubbling up inside her and tried her best to shove the feelings far away.

He was staring so intently at her she thought she might as well have been a five-headed Zippleback.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked, his eyebrows betraying his anxiety.

"Just a bit fuzzy," she replied, "but you should worry about yourself. You've got some blood on your face."

"It's your blood," he grimaced.

She looked at him with more attention, and saw the crimson stain on his clothes and his hands.

"What?"

"I've bandaged you, but it's not that great. You," he moved slowly toward her, "should try to get some more rest. I'm just glad you're finally awake."

"No, no, I feel fine. I'm a soldier. I'm fine," she said, but her voice wavered as she tried to increase the distance between them, while looking for her wound. The sharp pain to her left upper ribs gave it away.

"Ow!"

Her leather vest was badly torn and bloodied, as was the tunic underneath it. She parted the fabric to look at Hiccup's handywork.

"I always bring some bandages with me," he explained as she observed herself silently, "just in case. You were bleeding, and I didn't know what else to do. You wouldn't wake up."

"You bandaged me," she said, not even bothering to hide her surprise, still looking at the covered injury.

"You wouldn't wake up," he repeated, his voice thicker.

He'd gotten closer without her realizing it; she felt his breath on her neck and it sent shivers running up and down her back and her arms.

"I thought I would lose youâ€|"

His lips now rested softly on the nape of her neck, eliciting a vigorous response from the swarm of butterflies within her. Even her fingers wanted to react, wanted to **touch** him like they used to, so they were both numb and tingling at the same time.

But he wasn't hers. He was supposed to return to Berk and be bound to someone else. It enraged her, even more so because her mind seemed to not want to let go of those haunting thoughts, tormenting her daily with images of Hiccup being involved with another woman.

Kissing that other woman. Caressing her. Doing the things **she** wanted to do with him, **to** himâ€|

"You already have."

She shoved him away and pushed herself off the ground, the swiftness with which she stood up making her temporarily lose her sight and her balance. She swayed a little, leaning into the tree for support. Then she breathed that hot air in, and began to walk away. She ignored his calls for her, and focused on trying to find Stormfly.

She looked around and tried to pretend she didn't see or hear Hiccup, who was now slanting up against a tree looking positively deflated.

"Oh, come on Astrid," he nearly pleaded, "You're being a little childish right now!"

"I just want to find my dragon. Where's Stormfly?"

He scowled and crossed his arms, but replied nonetheless.

"I don't know. When I came to, she wasn't around. I told Toothless to go look for her."

Astrid was preoccupied now. What if her dragon had gotten hurt?

"Well, I'm not gonna just sit around and wait. I'll go look for her, and then I'm out of here," she said, mentally adding to herself *if* she's okay to fly

"What? And where are you going to? We have no idea where we are!" Hiccup looked distressed. Good. He deserved to be stressing out about this.

"Where on Midgard are we *supposed* to be, Hiccup? We barely flew out there. The storm kicked us back into Berk, so obviously we're somewhere in the woods"

"Wow," Hiccup drawled in his usual sarcastic voice, "and all these years I thought you were observant, and I was the distracted one."

She would have moved in to punch him in the arm, but right then she didn't even feel like he deserved her being so close to him.

"Whatever."

And off she stormed, making sure her strides were fast and surefooted, and not just some nervous shuffling of her legs.

She hated to even admit it to herself, but Hiccup was right. They really weren't in Berk anymore.

The first pointer was the temperature. The air was hot and damp, almost like the air in the hot springs they had so cherished. Berk's air was *never* like that. Even in the warmer summer days it was still rather crisp and dry. The second indicator of their unknown location was the sudden increase in temperature as soon as she'd left the shade of the trees, when she stepped into the open space of the sunbathed beach.

Then she noticed the sand, unnaturally thin and so much unlike the thick pebbles from the shores of Berk, and when she turned back to face the direction where she'd walked from, she found herself sheepishly staring at odd trees she had never seen before.

What the heck kind of trees *were* those?

There was absolutely nothing ahead of her except for more sand and then the blue vastness of sea. Great. She tried calling out for Stormfly by imitating a Deadly Nadder call, but got no response. So she had no choice but to double back into those strange woods.

And this time, she actually *observed*. The strange trees and the odd fruits, the unfamiliar sounds and the enticingly sweet scents. The odd birds flying about, the strange animals hiding behind foliage

she'd never seen, or crawling in the loamy soil beneath.

She was actually somewhat mesmerized by this outlandish new place, and had to suppress the sudden urge to explore it. Right now she was concerned about Stormflyâ€¢!

And Hiccup. Deny it she may, disguise it all she want, but he definitely was under her skin. She needed to put in as much distance as possible between them, to avoid temptations.

Ha! She reprimanded herself. How could such a confident, self-assured woman as herself even think about _being tempted_ by that, that boy? No way. Any of those feelings were completely futile and unworthy of her time and consideration.

That is, of course, until she met up with him again. Her resolve nearly went up in a wisp of smoke while her legs seemed to wobble dangerously. She blamed it on her flesh wound, which could be considered partially true, anyway.

The one he'd patched up while she was out cold. He'd probably had to wrap the ligaments around her chest, with her tunic pulled up. She tried not to linger on the thought as he approached her, Toothless now by his side as usual.

"Ah. Here you are. Thought you might have gotten lost on your way back to the village. Should I draw you a map of Berk?"

"You're too funny for your own good, Hiccup."

"So I've been told. Apparently the ladies love my sense of humor."

She couldn't really hide her smile as Toothless nuzzled her, obviously happy to see she was feeling well and awake. She fondly petted his head as he gently headbutted her, and she felt a little pang of guilt because while she was avoiding Hiccup, she'd been avoiding his dragon as well.

So she shot Hiccup a dirty look.

"Good thing I'm no lady. Just a dragon-riding shieldmaiden who's lost her dragon."

He must have realized his jape wasn't the funniest and made a face.
"Sorry. Toothless didn't find Stormflyâ€¢!"

"Thank you. Good boy," she told Toothless, again petting him and ignoring Hiccup, "but it looks like I'll have to keep looking for her myself. Goodbye."

The Night Fury warbled in protest and flapped his ears down, while his rider took a nervous step forward.

"Hey, I don't think we should split up again. We don't know how long we'll be here and we don't know what's out there at night!"

"I can handle myself." Yes, she was being stubborn. But she's a Viking, after all.

"I'm just saying, if we stick together we'll all have better chances out here."

"I'll take my chances by myself, thanks."

But he kept trailing along behind her, unwavering. By the gods, he was more than overly aggravating.

"Toothless can be really helpful."

"And you can be really annoying."

"You don't have a dagger."

"You won't have a face, if you keep nagging me."

His voice sounded serious this time, "I'm not leaving you alone in this place. Listen to me."

She didn't want to.

"Listen to me, Thor damn it!"

He grabbed her hand and yanked gently, dragging her up against his chest.

"Let me go," she seethed, ready to punch the living daylights out of him, but he grabbed her other hand by the wrist and held on tightly.

"Not until you listen to what I have to say."

He sounded so adamant, so determined. But then again, so was she. She wouldn't go down without a fight, and he certainly wasn't going to be the one to stop her.

"Screw this! Just stop messing around with me," she tugged and pulled but he held his vice grip tightly, "or I'll hurt you, I really will!"

"Do it."

Oh, was he daring her? This was so on.

She pulled back as far as she could go with her hands held, and then put all of her body's strength on the slam. The impact seemed to send him stumbling backwards, but it also made the pain in her ribs more noticeable. Still he held her hands and his balance, and pulled her back into him. She tried kneeing him, but he saw ahead of her and blocked her blow by twisting her downwards.

She screamed, enraged, and slammed into him again. This time he just spread his legs to steady himself and took the impact on his shoulder, and he spun, twirling her around. She fell to the ground and he just dove in after her, effectively pinning her down.

The way he overcame her took her completely by surprise; clearly she had underestimated him. Yes, she was injured â€“ though not badly â€“, but he was not in tip-top shape himself; yet he'd managed to overpower her like some helpless maiden.

"I'm sorry," he said, but his hold on her didn't lessen.

"Don't be," she spat out, "now you can gloat about how you won a fight against me."

"I'm not talking about this," he said, referring to their current situation. "Please, I keep asking you to listenâ€| just have some faith in me."

How could she? She was badly hurt â€" on the inside. She still felt like everyone she was supposed to trust had betrayed her by omitting the ugly truth. She wasn't really willing to trust anyone, or place her faith in someone, or believe in people's words.

But what else could she do? He would insist in getting this out of the way, and while they were stuck in this place she might as well hear what he'd have to say. She would listen to his explanations but she would do as she had promised herself â€" she could not betray her emotions to him, would not expose herself right now. But she would hear him out this one timeâ€|

And then, she would go. She'd find Stormfly and get away.

"I'll listen," she finally said, never making eye contact with him, "but then I'll make my choice. And you'll be okay with it."

He hesitated before replying.

"If your choice involves leaving by yourself, I'm not agreeing."

Gods, why was he making everything so much more complicated for her?

"Oh, for Thor's sake! **Why** is it that you can't just **let me go**?"

She did look at him then. She looked straight into his eyes and saw a mirrored expression of how she felt â€" hurt, confused, revolted.

"I can't get you out of my head." His grip on her slackened.

But she remained where she was.

"Actually, for some time now, Iâ€| I think about you a lot," he shifted his gaze from her eyes to some point around her neck, "But lately, it's like every moment that I spend by myself is spent thinking of you and this whole situation. You're driving me crazy."

He paused and plopped on his elbows, lowering his chest and resting it upon hers. The position they were in was now uncomfortably intimate, but somewhere in the back of her mind a hidden part of her subconsciousness was cheering and reeling in giddiness.

"I thinkâ€| I think of how this all just got messed up. So messed up, Astrid. I couldn't control it," he shook his head, "none of it."

He regretted what had happened. But he was still at fault with

her.

"You should have told me. You should have said **something** to me. And the day your father announced it, in front of all those peopleâ€‘ I was so angry, Hiccup. I still am."

His hands were no longer gripping her wrists, but simply resting there, some of his fingers in her palms. He still wouldn't look her in the eyes now.

"I was trying to figure out the best way to say it. My father just couldn't wait. If you knew how sorry I amâ€‘"

Oh, by Odin. So was she. She was so, so very sorry that things had to take this sort of a turn. She was also sorry to feel his body leave hers; despite the heat and all of her reluctance, it felt good to feel this close to him, to be able to breathe him up. He sat on the ground and wrapped his arms around his knees. She also sat up, but crossed her legs, using her arms for support. The silence lasted a couple of minutes before he spoke again.

"First of all, I was scared of how you would react. Mostly I was scared you might be indifferent."

"What do you mean?"

"You knowâ€‘ I thought you might tell me we should just move on, like it was nothing. Like we were nothing."

Okay. That hurt a little. Did he take her for some shallow girl? How could he think she'd just brush him off like that?

"Then I had all these stupid ideas in my head. You know, plans. Or, well, more like fantasies..."

He then seemed to review his choice of words, and hurriedly added, "Uh, not fantasies! I mean, not as in t-the fantasy fantasies, you know, no weird or kinky stuff at all! I mean, justâ€‘" he groaned, certainly annoyed at his visible nervousness.

"Soâ€‘ more like hypothetical scenarios," Astrid ventured, pretending his little stumble hadn't just happened.

"Yeah. That. Thanks."

She'd had those too. So many were the possibilities: killing off the girl, or killing off the chief of the Bunkerheads for that matter â€“ in various colourful ways, she was an imaginative woman â€“ or running off with Hiccup, even, but she'd told herself that was an absurd and overly-romantic idea.

She had eventually just settled for the easiest path. Going rogue for some time had seemed like a simple, easy strategy to execute but then there was, literally, a hiccup in her plan.

She was curious, though.

"What were they?"

"Hmmm?"

"Your hypothetical scenarios."

"Ah."

He reddened and cleared his throat, but spoke nothing.

"I thought you said no kinky stuff," she said, the smallest of smiles hanging tentatively in the corners of her lips.

He tilted his head before saying, "Yeah, right. Justâ€| it doesn't matter now. We've made our choices, haven't we?"

"Yours wasn't much of a choice, I suppose." And neither was hers. Was it?

"No. It wasn't, butâ€| at the same time it was. It still **is** my choice, in fact."

"What do you mean?" she asked, not getting it.

He stood up and paced around nervously, "It's funny, you know? I had rehearsed these conversations in my head with you, over and over again, and now it's like I can't remember how to say the words I want."

"Just say it, Hiccup. If you'd spoken up before â€""

"Yes, **I know that**. I know I screwed up by not telling you and that's all on **me**. It was **my** choice and I chickened out, okay? Not my proudest moment."

He was now moving around, his hands flailing and gesturing about, speaking more at the air than directly **to** her, his voice seeping with aggravation.

"But I mean, how in Hel was I supposed to tell you that I am to be used as a political leverage through a wedding contract? That's an incredibly overdone clichÃ© for us Vikings! But that's what we do, we stick to all these stupid _traditions_ and _rituals_ even if they make us feel Thor-damned miserable!"

He was as revolted as she was. She thought he might be; but he had still hurt her feelings deeply.

"I should have just seen it coming! And why not? Things are _expected_ of me! I'm supposed to conform to my role as the son of the Chief, so why not let someone else pick who I get to spend the rest of my **life** with?"

She should have been the chosen one, but Fate had been unkindly. She was startled when he punched a nearby tree suddenly; but he kept talking, and she didn't want to interrupt.

"Who cares about what I want, anyway? Who gives a damn about how I feel?"

She didâ€| but he needn't know that. Another punch, and now a pause.

"You know what my father told me?" This time he seemed calmer. He stared up at the trees. "That marrying for love is a **luxury**. It's a privilege denied to many, he says, but most people just consider it folly!"

Love? Did he sayâ€¦?

"So what choice do I have?"

He held up both his hands up in front of him. He raised his right hand, "Should I do as I'm told, and accept this to be my fate as Berk's future leader?"

He raised his left hand, his dominant one, "Or do I make my own path?"

She knew he wasn't really asking her the questions, but she burningly wished she could reply. But truthfully, one thing was what they wanted. Another thing was what they **had** to do. The **right** thing to do.

But right for who?

"You know, Astrid. The day I took you on that first flight, remember?"

"How could I forget?" They both smiled at the memory fondly, pausing a little to reminisce.

"I was willing to leave Berk that day to protect Toothless. Then you caught me, and you know the rest."

She did. Her whole world shifted that day. He walked up to her and took her hands in his own; this time she didn't back away.

"I kept thinking about leaving this time too. But I'd take you with me."

Her heart seemed to be drumming up against her ribcage. So apparently he'd had thoughts along the lines of her own.

"Why didn't you, then?" Had she been in a stable state of mind, she'd never have uttered the question. She didn't want to transpire too much emotion, and yet she couldn't help it.

"We're not just talking about succession problems here. They might wage war on us. Athole threatened to burn Berk to the ground, and if the rumours about his alliances with Roman generals are any true..."

She gasped. Romans? How was that possible? Even with their dragons, if a Roman fleet attacked, combined with the Bunkerheads' already large numbers, sturdy vessels and potent weaponsâ€¦ not to mention other allies they had. It would be suicide to take them on. The sheer number of casualties would be staggering.

The man was insanely bent on conquer. She shuddered.

"They might want dragons to fight **for** them, too," she whispered.

"That's what I believe. To be honest I don't think there's a clean way out of this whole hot mess. It would be a lot simpler to just run off, but if something went wrong I'd never be able to live with myself."

She understood. This wasn't just for mere political leverage. It was a matter of possibly ensuring the village would survive Athole's blind greed for power.

"That's why I need to get back to Berk," he finished gloomily.

She nodded, but then she shook her head. She knew what he would say.

"Come back with me."

"No," she said, resolutely.

"Come back _with me_," he pleaded.

"No."

"Come on. Let's go back _together_," and his fingers fondled her hands gently, enticingly.

"I said no, Hiccup." Her voice wavered.

"Please don't leave. Don't do it." Good gods, was he begging? It was like his fingers were prodding at her heart.

"I **can't** go back! What else am I supposed to do?" Now she wasn't so sure about her choices anymoreâ€¦ but she needed to be firm!

"Think about your family."

"**Don't** do that, Hiccup. Don't you dare play that card on me."

But he was right. Despite being hurt about how her parents had acted, her family and its honour were still the things she wanted to believe in the most. Though it was no simple task.

Hiccup had somehow changed her view on the world. She no longer placed unquestioning faith in authority, she no longer blindly vouched for any old tradition. He introduced her to a whole new world a long time ago and, reluctantly â€“ little by little â€“ she found herself beginning to _enjoy_ the novelties, the breakthroughs, their own revolution of sorts. The marks of a new generation of Vikings.

However, honour was still the supporting pillars of her ethical system. By fleeing she was gambling with her family name, and she was admitting her feelings for Hiccup were much too intense. She was torn.

"I just need to find myself right now. I thought, of all people, you'd understand."

He had no reply for that one.

"I guess I'm not ready to let go of you." And he didn't. He was still holding her hands.

"You can't have both thingsâ€| I can't just stand there and watch you with that, _that girl_." She couldn't keep the disdain from her voice, but she didn't try to either.

"It would be the other way around, I promise. Nobody would care, Astrid!"

Whoah. Wait. Just. A. Minute.

"I can't believe it," she chuckled humourlessly and promptly removed her hands from his.

"You' have me as your concubine?" She asked, and all the response she needed was plastered clearly on his face in the form of a flashy shade of crimson.

"That's not reallyâ€| uhmâ€| That's not how I see it, I meanâ€| "

"**No**! I am Astrid Hofferson!" she yelled and turned her back on him. "I'm nobody's second!"

"You'd never be my second, you'd be my first!" he then added lamely, "just not officially."

She scoffed and shimmied away from him when he tried to touch her shoulder.

"My social position isn't **that** low," she said, her voice dripping with disdain. A concubine, gods be good. Like some sexual plaything. She blushed heavily, thankful to have her back turned to him.

"Gods," he groaned, "that's really not how I meant it."

"That's how it sounded and that's what it would look like."

"For Thor's sake," Hiccup groaned, "I'm so sorry. I have no idea why I said that, I justâ€|"

He started out with a growl that quickly turned into a full-scale scream, and the sound startled her so much that she actually jumped.

"Do you have **any** idea how this whole thing feels? For me? Everything just keeps adding up and I'm so damn sick of all of it! I didn't even want to get married yet, to anyone, **at all**!"

She shouldn't be surprised about that statement, and really she wasn't. What did surprise her was how it kind of hurt her a little, despite her sharing his feelings about not wanting to be married before she was prepared.

"But then, you know, my dad gives me all this big talk and that automatically sends me on a friggin' guilt trip, and it makes me

wonder, you know? Obviously if I had to be forced into wedding, I always knew I'd chose you if given the chance."

He was exposing himself fully. She wished she'd have the same courage, but if she spoke she feared she may never uphold what she promised herself.

"And then that chance just goes up in flames, and here I am wondering why the gods mock me with the choices they give me."

The gods seemed to mock them both. Maybe it was a divine private joke, to pull two lovers apart like this.

"You're not the only one who is forced to make difficult choices, Hiccup."

"I know. But I've got a Hel of a burden to carry, no matter which one I pick."

First off, she didn't like him playing the victim. Second, some part of her still desperately wanted him to know how much this was affecting her.

"And how are my burdens any lighter than yours?"

It was becoming mildly irritating for her, the way he seemed to just downplay what she felt for him. Sure, she never said the words "she's more of a person who acts upon her feelings instead of reciting them through words" but weren't her past actions proof enough? Heck, wasn't her leaving Berk proof enough?

Hiccup might be an incredibly intelligent guy, but damn was he absolutely thick sometimes.

"I'm not sayingâ€|" he sighed and rubbed his temples, obviously frustrated about not being able to communicate the way he'd wanted to. "It's just that, with all of this I kind of start to question my morals."

"Why? Because you wanted to disobey your father?"

"Not just that. My indecision has made me question what kind of a person I am. I actually thought about possibly starting a warâ€| Over you."

Now she was the one who felt thick-headed. She never really considered what kind of inner struggle could be going on with him, mostly because she was shrouded by all that anger she felt after she learned the truth in the most inconvenient, hurtful way possible.

So hee could never win, no matter what his choice was. His happiness or the village's safety. Avoiding a war by trading in his right to love freely.

And then he whispered, almost imperceptibly, "I'm still not sure if I won'tâ€|"

Astrid's chest tightened as her mind and body impulsively resonated with that familiar feeling Hiccup always seemed to rouse on her. It rippled right to the very core of her soul and made her want to jump

on him and hold him and kiss him silly, but she held it all down.

Astrid, always so in control of herself; but for some time she'd known one day she'd lose it over him, under the right circumstances. And to think he feared being rejected by herâ€| what an idiot. He really was clueless.

However, she would not go back to him to be taken as his concubine. The very concept revolted her, and was profoundly unbecoming for a warrior with her kind of fibre. She didn't want to be his lover while he was in wedlock with another. She couldn't. She was too proud.

And right now she had no idea of what to say to him. She loathed herself for it, but she couldn't avoid a sense of flattery, in a way â€“ how far would he have gone for her, if given the chance?

Not that she would give him that chance. It really was a frightening concept, to even entertain the idea of just letting all the people they knew face this kind of danger, when they were the ones who could avoid it.

A nervous chuckle came out of her before she spoke, "I guess we'll just have to live with our regrets, then."

He nodded sullenly, his arms crossed over his chest, his demeanour as dark as she'd ever seen it.

"That's why I won't let you out there alone. I know you feel like you can handle it, but we're literally in the face of the unknown right now. I can't stand you being in danger again. Twice was enough."

Twice? Oh.

"Hiccup. It's not that I don't appreciate what you did back in the docks for me, butâ€|"

"Cut the crap." His voice suddenly had an unknown, sharp edge to it. "There were two of them, Astrid. Two! You've got to be kidding me if you think you would have made it out okay."

He was now breathing deeply, trying to keep his nerves down, but he couldn't do it. Not now, when he was clearly so raw after everything that had happened, everything they'd said. He walked over to her briskly and his hands flew to cup her cheeks; but not so much in a loving, tender fashion. No. This wasn't the calm, gentle Hiccup. This was something else.

"I'm just sorry I didn't get to stab the other motherfucker. I won't let anyone else touch you like that against your will again, you mark my words."

Toothless warbled worriedly, and that seemed to snap Hiccup out of his unusual state. He turned his back to a very stunned Astrid and walked over to Toothless.

"We need to find fresh water," he barked in a voice that wasn't his, "we're all out."

* * *

><p>Fishlegs cursed his shortness of breath for the umpteenth time in ten minutes. Every other teen in the gang decided it was a very, very bad idea to speak to the Chief so soon about what they'd seen, but he felt otherwise.</p>

He finally caught up with Stoick as the man was heading over to the harbour. His explanations were confused and his words seemed to come out differently from what they'd seemed like they would sound in his head — certainly due to the combination of his disquiet and a bloody hangover.

It took some convincing to drag an irritable Stoick all the way to the Training Academy — after all, Fishlegs couldn't really **say** what they'd seen, they needed the Chief to see it himself — and when they arrived, their burly leader cursed so badly even Tuffnut's eyes went wide.

"Wha' in Thor's name is she doin' here in this condition?" Gobber immediately ran up to retrieve some emergency kit they always kept in one of the Academy's chambers, just in case someone got hurt.

"We had to bring her down from the chains, sir. She was trapped up there," Snotlout said, gesturing to the safety chains that formed the open-ceiling dome of the Arena.

"And we can't find Astrid anywhere!" Tuffnut finished miserably.

They all watched silently as Stoick approached Stormfly, and placed his huge hand delicately on her snout. She was badly hurt. Her left wing was at an odd angle and the chains had somehow cut through her rough hide. She must have spent the whole night struggling to get free of her suspended prison, without avail. Even the spikes on her tail were mostly missing, or broken. She was exhausted, hurt, and confused.

Hookfang surrounded Stormfly's body protectively with his own. Barf and Belch kept sniffing at her and purring softly, and Meatlug sat directly in front of Stormfly's face, looking downtrodden.

"If Astrid isn't here, an' Stormfly is in such bad shape!"

Stoick didn't even want to finish that sentence.

Where are you, son?

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER 7

* * *

><p>(Ye long Autor's Notes)

Well then! There's that. So yes, Toto, they are not in Kansas anymore.

I have this odd feeling all the time (and I know I continuously

complain about this), that I keep on trying to break down the thought processes of the characters I write, because I want to understand where their reactions come from.

Or at least I want to try to make it seem like they'd be likely to go down the path I want them to. LOL!

So I always hope I don't spiral into OOC-ness. I hate going overboard when I'm trying to convey someone's feelings, yaknowwhatimean?

Anywhoo, I need opinions. Stat. I probably should have done this before because of the language (not sure LOL) but - it is highly likely that I'll change this fic's rating to **M**.

The reason? I don't think I can hide from the smut. I badly, badly want to write smut. So badly. Halp. xD

Plus, possible violence and all that jazz.

Sooooo as per usual:

Kindly review if you've read this far (_anyway if you have, you're amazing! can I cuddle my main reviewers? i luv youse guys_) just so I can get some idea on how the storyline's being perceived and how the characters are acting. It's helpful above all else, and to be honest it cheers me up and I need some cheer-me-up'in.

Please point out any typos, as usual...they bother me. Badly. SO BADLY.

Also: I think this is the longest chapter so far? Hmm? It **WAS** going to end in another cliff-hanger but TBH I lacked the spirits for it, thee hee. Plus, too many cliffhangers get boring eventually, amirite?

Thank you for reading, and most of all, for putting up with my rants. I know I'm a ranter. :D

8. Unbridled urge to explore

New chapter up! Sorry if it took long. Can't really rush these things, can we? :)

So... I wasn't quite planning on it yet, but I'm changing the rating to M with his chapter: **THOU HAST BEEN WARNED**, though I'm unsure if it warrants it. Uhm. I just wanted cuddle-time. this chapter was NOT intended this way and I wanted it to end with a cliffhanger, but my needs got in the way!

If anyone has any sexy songs or playlists they would like to recommend, please go ahead. I like music to inspire me.

**DISCLAIMER: **_been there, done that. Refer to previous chapters._

* * *

><p>CHAPTER 8: **Unbridled urge to explore**

* * *

><p>After he'd managed to calm down, Hiccup was actually beginning to worry that his slight outburst might have startled Astrid. He certainly didn't feel like himself when he said what he said â€“ nor when he pounced on the men in the docks. Those weren't normal reactions for him. But then again, the situation Astrid had been in was far from normal, too.</p>

It had been an outburst of his protective instincts â€“ funny, considering how strong he knew Astrid to be â€“ but, more than that, he'd felt a strange surge of raw jealousy. He thought about what she'd said to him; that she couldn't watch him go off with another woman. He couldn't help sympathizing with the feeling now.

However, she at least didn't run off like she'd said she would. He took it as a much-welcome sign that his words had gotten through to her, despite her reluctance. A flicker of hope. Maybe he could still convince her to head back to Berk.

He couldn't deny himself that her guarded reaction was somewhat of a disappointment, but then again that was Astrid â€“ cool and composed, at least most of the time. He couldn't exactly expect her to be all swooned and grateful and eager to jump into his armsâ€¦ Even though he'd saved her honour and bandaged her wounds. It was selfish of him to believe he deserved a reward or at least some recognition â€“ he was sure she would also have done the same, had their roles been reversed â€“ but, alas, he did.

Was he being egotistical? Maybe. It would seem she could unwillingly bring out the worst in him as well as the best all at the same time.

Toothless' fin tail device had been damaged in the fall, so they were unable to fly. Hiccup's own prosthetic had suffered some nasty dents, so he had the slightest of limps to his gait. The three of them made their way on foot, silently admiring the unfamiliar place.

Everything was the opposite of what they were used to. The air was damp instead of dry, warm instead of cold, and when they breathed it in it seemed to carry a mixture of scents and textures.

The flora was unlike anything they had ever seen. Thousands of oddly-shaped flowers sprung from the soil and from between the greeneries and even hung from atop the trees as if they had dared climb them, their thick petals beautifully speckled with dashes of outstandingly bright colours. The lazy sun filtered between the vegetation above and around them, and it was as if the air itself had colours suspended in it, thin veils of sunshine made of blue, and red, and orange, and purple.

It was completely surreal, and they couldn't help but stop and admire the effects of this phenomenon. Hiccup stood gazing at Astrid at one point, when she had stopped just where a ray of rosy pink light hit her face; her skin seemed to be glowing in blush. It reminded him of breathless kisses stolen at the forge, of fleeting moments when they dared risk being noticed by kissing in plain sight for more than two

seconds. She noticed him staring and arched her eyebrows, cocking her head sideways and breaking the effect. He scoffed and turned around, continuing on his path and trying to get his legs to coordinate themselves again.

Hiccup couldn't help running his fingers over the bark of each different tree they came across, wondering whether these different woods could serve different purposes. Even at a time like this his mind was filled with wonder and a sense of exploration, a will to experiment and to seek new knowledge.

Most of the trees were absolutely unique. Some had a smooth, light-colored bark all set in layers, almost like they were covered in thick wooden rings. They stood at great height but were kinked, some of them twisting in odd directions, as if drawn to some unseen lover. Their foliage was nothing short of strange â€“ resembling long green blades all bunched together, hanging over their heads and right in front of their faces, thick and rigid, as if demanding a toll for their passage.

Other trees were downright bizarre. There were these really odd ones â€“ even Toothless stopped to sniff and bite at them â€“ with what looked like hair hanging from their trunks. Some of the smaller trees even seemed to have wooden scales on them, like someone had been haphazardly nailing small bits of wood to a post.

Hiccup only wished he'd brought his sword along with him, but at least the dagger attached to his gauntlet gear was razor sharp. He and Toothless would often have to cut through the dense vegetation, leaving a scandalous trail of destruction in their passage. They became sticky with sap as they hacked away, rivulets of tacky fluid exuding from the forest just like blood from a freshly cut wound. The balmy, earthly scent wrapped around them and nearly overpowered all the other woodland fragrances, dragging into their lungs with each inhalation.

Somehow he felt oddly bad about having to cut their way around â€“ they were, for all intents and purposes, intruders in that place. And it seemed to be so alive, like it was a living being breathing hot air upon them itself.

Sometimes he had this sensation that the trees would twist in their place to look at them as they walked by, mutely watching them in their progress through the wilderness. It was verily disconcerting because they were travelling as silently as possible â€“ Astrid and Toothless were stealth masters, as it were, but Hiccup didn't fall too far behind them when it came to discretion â€“ yet in this place, they seemed to create the most terrible commotion with every little step.

It wasn't that the forest was entirely silent. Quite the contrary: the leaves constantly rustled with the soft sea breeze and the trees themselves seemed to groan as they swayed whenever a stronger wind blew; the sounds of unknown birds and other animals filled the air in a perfect symphony. It was as if the whole place was one single entityâ€| So that was the problem. Hiccup, Toothless and Astrid were foreigners in this island, and each of their noises and movements seemed so out of place, so inharmonious.

Twigs and branches inevitably snapped and crunched beneath them as

they walked around, no matter how carefully they tread on the moist soil. Their feet (well, Hiccup's foot and metal device) sometimes dragged the earth and pulled at the plants, making him trip more times than he'd like to count.

This was a place where very few people had been before, Hiccup thought, if any at all. The birds " arrayed with feathers even more colourful than the flowers " seemed to be unafraid of the two humans, but they would always fly away when Toothless sauntered by. There were claw and teeth marks littering the surface of many of the trees, and Hiccup wondered why they still hadn't seen any other animals aside from birds and some odd insects.

Really big, nasty insects, actually. He tried not to think about those.

They finally reached their objective after a few excruciating hours of dragging about and hacking around in the steaming hot woods " a small river of fresh running water, bearded by soft lush grass and thick shrubberies, its shimmering crystalline surface offering the much-needed solution for their tremendous thirst.

"Finally!" Astrid croaked, speaking for the first time since Hiccup's little outburst that morning, her whole face lighting up in relief.

The water was fresh and sweet and the three of them drank eagerly. The sensation of cold water running down his overly-dry throat was dearly welcomed, its soothing coolness bringing him a sense of utter relief. Of their party, Hiccup was probably the one having the hardest time, all clad in his riding leather.

After he drank his fill of water he washed the remnants of dried blood off his hands and face; then he splashed his neck and his hair, gladly welcoming the cool droplets gliding against his skin. The sensation was short-lived though, as they seemed to evaporate terribly fast the moment they vanished under his collar.

His leather gear acted as small furnace and kept all the temperature inside, so at this point Hiccup very much wanted the temperature outside. He watched in jealousy as Toothless unceremoniously dunked into the flowing stream and stayed there, only a large portion of his wings and the tip of his snout visible above the water line. Only his sense of propriety held Hiccup back from simply stripping off all his clothing and joining the dragon.

"Hey buddy," Hiccup called as he stood up from his crouching position over the river, Toothless' head raising from the water. "You keep an eye on her, will you?"

Toothless warbled and nodded, and then switched his focus over to Astrid as if he were a watch dog.

"Where are you going?" She asked, still sprawled over the soft grass like it was a blanket.

"I can't stand this heat. I'll be back quickly," he announced, and he went in search for a private place down the river where he could change quietly. He soon found the perfect spot " between two particularly large trees, surrounded by thick shrubbery " and began

undressing all his riding gear. He pondered whether he should just remove his woollen tunic as well, but decided against it. It would just be weird right now.

He took a moment to relieve himself on a nearby tree and then gathered his items in a bundle, making his way back.

He returned to find Astrid sitting on a small smooth rock at the river bank; she had removed her metallic shoulder pads and her fur cape, her arm protections and her boots. He could see the rip on her tunic, still blood-stained. Her tight trousers were bunched up around her knees while her feet were inside the refreshing water.

This left most of her lower legs exposed, and as Hiccup walked closer to her he felt this pressing _urge_ to run his fingertips through her plae skin and the soft blonde hairs that covered it. He forced himself to look somewhere else, trying to shrug the temptation away; he shuddered, and hoped she didn't notice.

He saw that Toothless was somewhere farther up the river â€“ not too far, though â€“ frolicking about in the water, jumping in it and splashing like a carefree child in a summer day, searching for fish to eat. The way the water sparkled in the multi-coloured air was beautiful; they looked so delicate and ethereal, in complete contrast with the raw strength of the black dragon's muscles and the flexible ruggedness of its scaly hide. Hiccup wished there was somehow a way to freeze the image forever as it was, but no painter in the world would ever be able to fully capture a moment like this.

He sighed. "Hey! I thought I told you to keep an eye on her!" Hiccup said, but Toothless merely ignored him. Astrid scoffed loudly.

"I don't need a nanny, you know?" She looked peeved, her left eyebrow climbing up her forehead in annoyance.

"It's just that a few hours ago you were pretty adamant on leaving. So, you knowâ€|" He trailed off and walked over to his travel bag, the one he'd packed the day before and had somehow mercifully been spared from their unfortunate encounter with the storm. He'd at least done a good job securing it to Toothless' saddle device.

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Hiccup wasn't looking at her, or he'd have noticed how her expression had softened. "Anyway, I could have run off if I'd wanted to. You sure took your sweet time out there."

"Well, I'd like to see **you** try and unbuckle all my straps faster than â€“"

Ah. That came out wrong. A mental kick is in order.

"â€|Nevermind."

While the leather bag was intact for the most part, they had very little supplies. He rummaged through it â€“ his amphora had been broken and he hadn't brought a leather sack to carry water with, and his supplies of dried fish and meat wouldn't last them long.

"Just great," he murmured as he picked broken pieces of clay from his

bag, pieces he'd missed after they'd landed. His first concern had been to stop Astrid's bleeding, so he hadn't bothered to clean it all up.

"That's all we have?" The proximity of her voice startled him. He hadn't realized she'd walked closer; she was now within arm's reach, making it easy for him to admire her legs. He felt somewhat silly for doing that, but he couldn't really help it. Where he usually saw the fur of her boots now he saw her calves, and that was a whole different experience. He wanted to kiss them.

Stop it, Hiccup.

"Yes. I just packed a little something for myself. Usually Toothless and I go fishing and I end up just keeping this for when I really need it. Here." He handed her two pieces of dried fish and a strip of meat, and when she took them their hands touched briefly. He flinched, but she gave no indication that the touch had had any effect on her.

"I wonder if we could eat some of these strange fruits," she bit a piece of meat and chewed, "they do smell nice."

Hiccup nodded in agreement and tentatively sniffed the sweet air. Enticing as the scents were, they couldn't be sure whether the fruits were edible or not.

"Yeah, but what if they're poisonous?"

They ate the rest of their meagre meal in silence. Aside from Toothless' splashing and occasional warble, the only sounds were those of the forest.

"We should probably move up the river," Astrid said after she finished eating, grabbing her boots and pulling them back on, keeping her pants rolled around her knees. If they were to find anyone, it would make more sense to stick to the flow of fresh water. Then again, they could just be digging too deep into the woodlands instead.

Hiccup agreed. He wished he could find a place with an opening â€“ the forest was too dense, too entwined above and around them, and all the spaces were too narrow for Hiccup to try and climb up with Toothless. They couldn't exactly blast at the greenery, else they might start a fire. But he was dying to see the place from above. Years of dragon-riding had made him feel more comfortable watching from the skies, at a distance. It granted him both safety and a much wider plane of view, allowing him to find his direction properly and not waste time.

Luckily they had Toothless with them. The dragon had an uncanny sense of orientation, aside from being able to easily smell their way back if they needed to retrace their steps â€“ not that it was easy to lose their own trails. If theirs wasn't the only one around, it certainly was the biggest.

They resumed their march â€“ Hiccup managed to fit most of his gear and Astrid's stuff into his bag and strapped it back on Toothless, who barely noticed the extra weight anyway. He padded along ahead of them, sniffing the air frequently, moving his ears and nubs according

to the sounds he searched for. He was on the hunt for food, Hiccup knew it. The birds were hard to reach in these conditions and that part of the river seemed to carry no sizeable fish, but there were bound to be other creatures around.

By the time night had fallen, they'd made very little progress. It became dark very soon, since the trees effectively blocked most of the setting sun's light. Hiccup's initial hype about the exploration soon dwindled as the sunlight gradually faded, shying away like some wounded beast about to retreat to its cave, tired of its daily struggle to break light into that wilderness.

"We need to stop and make camp," Hiccup announced, deflated. He was hungry, he was tired, and his heart had sunken a little each time he'd tried to speak to Astrid. He'd gotten only short, dry responses from her and was beginning to find her mood swings maddening.

They'd made small talk, idle talk. The kind of conversations one may have with an acquaintance, not a friend. Much less a loverâ€| or former lover, which he still refused to accept. Sometimes she would seem like she was going to get closer to him, but then she just brushed him off like he was an annoying pet.

Womenâ€| So confusing.

While they were setting camp â€“ clearing off the ground, starting the fire (with Toothless' help, of course), checking the surrounding area â€“ he couldn't help but muse over the kiss from that morning. He was itching to talk to Astrid again. He'd already said so much, but she had said _so little_ â€“ close to nothing at all, really.

They had seemingly reached a deadlock in their relationship (Hiccup wouldn't see it as anything else), and he wouldn't let it end like that. Stubbornness issues, indeed.

The temperature had dropped significantly now that the sun was no longer beating its heat down on them. Hiccup felt much more comfortable this way. It was still warm by Berk standards, but much more bearable than what it was during the day. If it weren't nearly impossible to see, they would be better off travelling during the night and resting throughout daytime.

They needn't cover themselves up with the fur blanket he had brought along, so he spread it on the ground instead. They could at least lie down comfortablyâ€|

It dawned on him, then: would they be sleeping next to one another? The thought alone made him jittery, filling his head with unlikely scenarios. Maybe he'd offer her the fur, and he'd just sleep on the ground instead.

Cold weather would be the perfect excuse for us to sleep next to each other. Damn this heat.

Working in silence, they gathered dry brushwood (there wasn't much around, everything was so green and lush) which Astrid then set on the ground Toothless had just cleared up with his paws, arranging it in an optimal way to start a fire. The Night Fury blew a small blast of blue heat onto the firewood, providing all of them with light for

the upcoming night.

A flame rose from its wooden bed in shades of pink and orange and white, reaching upwards like a girl on her toes, swaying shapelessly against its dark surroundings. The glare of light from the fire seemed to struggle against the darkness, strenuously fighting to keep the twisting shadows away.

The atmosphere of the forest changed altogether at night. It had lost its entire mystique, the novelty factor that had fascinated Hiccup all day long now gone in the clutches of dusk. Everything their fire couldn't cast its light upon was utterly dyed in black, a complete contrast with how it had been before nightfall.

Hiccup had never been afraid of the dark or the unknown, but when Toothless ambled away after being unsaddled, disappearing into the gloom of the forest, he couldn't deny he felt an uncomfortable twitch in the pit of his stomach. Even though he knew his best friend was just going hunting for nocturnal animals â€“ and would hopefully bring them back some game they could eat â€“ his absence made Hiccup uncomfortable.

At night, the mysterious trees seemed undeniably haunting, almost alive, animated by the contrast between light and dark. He knew it was just his imagination â€“ probably caused by exhaustion or hunger or both â€“ but the space seemed to close in on them, seemed to inch dangerously closer with each movement of the trembling shadows.

He could no longer hear the song of the colourful birds. In this darkness even the sounds seemed somewhat ominous. Now and then the distant cry of some unknown beast, or the howl of something prowling not too far awayâ€¦ each creek of any tree branch seemed to amplify tenfold, and it was genuinely getting on his nerves.

Maybe he was coming down with something? Odin's beard, he was a Viking! He was tougher than this. He refused to let the darkness make him uncomfortable, and besides he didn't want to seem nervous near Astrid. He could tell she was tense, too â€“ her shoulders were stiff and she wouldn't stop scanning the area over and over again. Her right hand would sometimes clutch at the air beside her, certainly missing the familiar wooden handle of her battle axe, and he knew she only shuffled her feet that way whenever she was anxious. They both were.

Astrid finally sat down on the fur and Hiccup took his place on the ground next to it. He opened his bag and shared a little more food with her. Even at this rate, his supplies wouldn't last them two whole days.

Hiccup hated that they were both so sullen. He longed to be able to bring it back, that ease with which they would slip into when talking to one another about anything. He wished he could discuss their surroundings with her, if only to remind himself of what everything looked like during the day, maybe to check if he hadn't just dreamed it all up. He wished he could tell her that despite his wariness of that eerie darkness, he loved the effect created by the orange glow of the fire as it spilled across her skin. It was her golden hair that stood out against the dark, even more so than the flames themselves.

Of course, he'd never be able to voice out his thoughts so coherently. He would have to write them down â€“ but a poem was something he had already cancelled out in the back of its mind, due to how negatively it was viewed in their society. The thought of a love letter pulled a ghost of a smile from his lips. It was a ludicrous idea. He'd feel silly even writing it and she'd probably just shake it off as such too. They would both laugh about it if he ever even brought it upâ€œ and he wanted to.

Astrid interrupted Hiccup's internal monologue.

"Do you think Toothless is going to be able to catch us anything?" she asked, staring at the dancing flames, her food untouched. She bit her lips, something that had always managed to throw Hiccup off at any given time. It made him want to taste them, too. He ignored the urge with a vigorous shrug.

"Probably. There seem to be more animals out at night," Hiccup replied, chewing the salty meat.

"Yeah," she said, "It's too bad they only come out when it's so dark. Hunting would help me unwind right nowâ€œ if I had a weapon to hunt with."

She had her knees up to her chin now, both her hands fisted at the sides of her thighs. "I can feel them moving around, rustling in the dark. It's kind of creepy."

Hiccup didn't really want to talk about the creepy. He wanted to talk about the unwinding.

"But if he doesn't bring back anything, I might just dig into some of those fruits, poisonous or not." His tone had been that of a joke, but Astrid's shoulders only drooped a little more, although her expression remained unreadable.

"I had some food packed in my bag too," she said stiffly, "and other stuff I wanted to bring with me. My gronckle-iron dagger was in that bag, andâ€œ andâ€œ"

She trailed off, pursing her lips when her voice threatened to crack. Hiccup understood what was on her mind: Stormfly. They hadn't found her or any traces of her. Toothless couldn't catch a single whiff anywhere except on Astrid, so they had no clue on what might have happened to the Nadder. He wanted to scoot over and fling his arm over her shoulder and just hug her, but he wasn't sure she'd welcome the proximity. She was being particularly hard to read, her body language stiff and shielded as when she was younger and not yet open towards him.

"Stormfly will be fine, Astrid." He said in the most reassuring way possible, when in reality he doubted his own words. "You did give her a suitable name. I'm sure she'll live up to it. She's strong."

She looked at him then, and he was startled to find her eyes gleaming. Maybe it was just a trick of the light...

"Hiccup, I'm scared." She whispered thinly, as if she didn't want the trees to hear her admit such a thing. And just like that, her guard was completely thrown down.

In less than a heartbeat he was by her side; during the past five years they'd come to understand each other a lot better, so he instinctively knew when she needed uplifting. She seemed oddly small as she took comfort in his embrace, his arms going around her back, her hands clutching the sides of his hips. She buried her head in his chest and he, out of sheer habit, kissed the crown of her head, whereupon he rested his chin.

In spite of everything He couldn't stop his chest from swelling in guilty delight â€“ they were in each other's arms again. He wondered if this would be the last time they were hold each other this way, but he pushed the bitter thought away. He wouldn't let his overactive mind ruin this for him, not nowâ€|. Even if it were just for a moment, he would cherish it dearly. And somehow he knew she felt the same way he did, for neither of them moved for some time. It just felt right.

"I've lost everything," she finally said in a thick voice, "everything."

"You haven'tâ€|" he couldn't really find the right words now.

"I ran from my parents. I ran from my people. I left everything behind," her hands were now clutching his sides tighter as she rocked slightly back and forth against him. "I lost my possessions and I lost my dragonâ€| my companionâ€|"

She pulled her head back and beheld at him; despite her dry cheeks her demeanour betrayed the anguish she felt.

"â€| I lost you?"

For a fraction of a moment, Hiccup wondered if she had just stated another fact or actually asked a question. He quickly settled for the latter. "No, you haven't." He closed his eyes and kissed her. He had meant for it to just be a soft, chaste kiss. A kiss of reassurance and affection, triggered by his need to quell her unhappiness â€“ almost unintentional, even.

As soon as their lips met he thought she would shove and reprimand him; she'd been pushing him away all day, not to mention the past weeks. But he didn't care, as long as it made her feel better.

Hiccup seldom initiated physical interaction with Astrid, mostly out of respect for her (and partially out of fear of getting whacked over the head), but he would follow her unspoken instructions. Each action of hers that might urge him on would always spur him to respondâ€|He knew she knew this.

He hadn't expected her to kiss him back -â€“ not like_ this_.

She sighed into his mouth; the strangled cry suggested that she was on the verge of tears, but she didn't stop. She was being completely relentless, desperate even.

The urgency of her kiss caught him off-guard. He feebly struggled against it just because he felt like he should, but now couldn't quite remember why. She ended his hesitations by taking his lower lip

in her mouth and running her wet tongue along it; he jolted involuntarily. His eyes shot wide open, that familiar warmth rippling within his chest. Well, that was new.

He didn't even entertain the flash of a question in the back of his mind _why now? Why like this, so suddenly?_ instead replacing it with a much more satisfying thought _she just used her tongue, she just used her tongue, she just used her tongue_.

Back to her lips his went. He reeled at the strangled sound she made when he drew on her lower lip, delighting in the texture of it in his mouth. This was something new and daring for him; heck, for the both of them. They'd never been so playful with their tongues before, always afraid of pushing past the limits.

But nowâ€|

He could feel her hands starting to move, her fingers gripping the fabric of his tunic in soft strokes, pulling at it, teasing. He wondered if she wanted to pull it off as badly as he wanted to pull hers offâ€| Odin forgive him. He was under Freyja's spell.

Should we stop?... Should I stop this?... Do I want to?... I don'tâ€| I want her.

He wanted to cross boundaries tonight. He wanted to get lost in the moment and, for once, not care about the consequences of their actions. He wanted more. Less thinking, more moving. More touching. More kissing. More. He didn't know if he'd have another chance to get to know what it felt like to be ****close**** to the woman he loved.

His hands slid away from her shoulder blades, gradually edging downwards; inch by inch they came closer to her waistline. He left her lips, tracing butterfly kisses on her cheeks; then he moved on to that spot between her jaw and her neck, hotly pressing urgent kisses against it. He ran his tongue over her jawline, unable to resist the urge to savour her skin.

"Ahh_hhhâ€|!"

She seemed as surprised by her own whimper as he was. Her shoulders and her head danced in slow motions as she writhed under his lips, and soon enough he could feel her lower body moving as well, its previous stiffness now replaced by some delectably primal sway.

Hiccup had gone astray, completely lost in her and in the way she made him want her so viciously; he felt lightheaded and thrilled and so undeniably horny. The more she gave herself in to him, the more he pulsated with unbridled anticipation. He was unable to stop his own body from throbbing and growing beneath his breeches, so eager to be as close to her as he could. He urged her on by sinking his fingertips deeper into the small of her back, wanting to ease her closer towards him.

But Astrid wasn't the kind of girl to take things easy. Her hands left his hips to grip his shoulders and before Hiccup knew it he was being pushed down, landing on his back with a small thud atop the fur. She climbed right on top of him, downright straddling his hips.

The weight of her on him was indescribable, as was the way she _looked_ at him. Her lips formed a small, surprised '_oh_' and he could see her expression changing into something else, something lascivious. He could see it in her face; she was lost, too.

She rested her hands palms-down on his chest and, tentatively, softly rocked her hips forward. He spontaneously rolled his pelvis upwards, a strange sensation sweltering in his chest and stomach.

Oh, by Thor! Dear gods, this is amazing.

Something very, very warm pressed just against that throbbing point between his legs. And when she rode up on him, sliding that _very_warm_ part of hers up across that _very stiff_ part of his, he temporarily lost any control over himself. His hands had obviously intended to grasp Astrid's tempting behind, but were instead met with the not-so-inviting spikes of her leather skirt.

"Ouch!"

It really didn't hurt that much, maybe because at that moment most of his feeling sensation was concentrated below his waist. He vaguely heard her apologizing whilst he quickly checked his palms â€“ no bleeding â€“ and then he felt her move again, bringing his focus back down south. He immediately pushed himself up on his elbows when he noticed her unstrap the side of her leather skirt; she quickly pulled it over her head, discarding it with uncanny elegance.

His heart missed a beat or two.

For a moment they just looked at one another. He wasn't pausing to think; he was pausing to revere in the sight of her, all breathless and flustered and positively exuding sensuality. Did she have **any** idea how hot she made him feel? The way she scanned him with her deep blue eyes gave him goosebumps all over the place; when she bit her lips he forgot how to breathe until he became dizzy, making his fingertips tingle and his mouth go dry. It was like the light of the fire came from her, and not from the actual flames themselves; he was on fire too, now. Desire lit up in him with a force he had never experienced before and it spread, from his loins to the rest of his body, spurring him to push himself up and _grab_ her, pulling her down on him.

They wouldn't stop kissing, licking, caressing, nipping at each other. He could somewhat feel her breasts against his chest, despite the layers of fabric between them. Her movements became bolder as her hips ground against his throbbing hardness, sliding up and down his groin. Hiccup _couldn't breathe_. She caressed his arms with her fingertips and he shivered fiercely; he groaned when she downright sucked on his tongue, enticing him even further. Both his hands grabbed her ass, now thankfully armour-less, drawing her up and pushing her back down on him, amplifying that delightful pressure. He pulsed harder and harder with each stroke of her hips, feeling himself threatening to overspill.

Oh Gods, no. Don't be so cruel. Not so soonâ€|_

"Stâ€| sto... ohâ€| sssstopâ€|" He could barely speak. He was still short of breath from her swaying motions and her lips hardly ever left his, so it was almost impossible to warn her. He closed his eyes

tightly shut; his jaw slackened as he spun into frenzy, the remnants of his voice escaping his throat in a choked moan. His brain shut down, leaving his body completely out of his control and utterly vulnerable. All he could do, in that fraction of a moment, was feel. His hips viciously buckled and pushed against Astrid, haphazardly following that off-beat orgasmic rhythm; his hands increased the force with which he was tugging at her. He thrusted upwards, pulled her downwards, pressed them together.

It was so close, so intimate, so intense. It was like pouring his soul out to her in an explosion of sheer energy, an infinite loop of overwhelming ecstasy for one fleeting instant. He wandered off, lost in a limbo that belonged to her entirely, his whole body going numb as it lost its verve. On the path of descent from his zenith, for a brief dwindling instant â€“ everything was so ****vivid****. So perfectly ****clear**** in that one split second when he opened his eyes.

He had always dedicated each of his orgasms to her. In those moments of release he was never truly alone â€“ he had always pictured it was her who was wrapped around him, pleasuring him. A vague recollection of Astrid, his guilty little escapade. But those had just been his fantasies; in that very instant she was right there, resting upon him, her hair tangled in his and her legs spread for him, her lips swollen and gleaming.

And he couldn't be more thankful to be able to see Astrid with the sharpness with which he saw her right now. He wouldn't want to feel this with anyone else. He didn't want to give in to anyone the way he gave in to her.

His lungs reopened, allowing him to draw air once again. His breath came out in ragged drags and went back inside in small spouts. He blinked, trying to get his eyes accustomed to a normal vision â€“ it seemed so blurry, compared to the acuity he'd previously experienced.

"Are you okay?" He heard her ask, snapping him out of it. He immediately realized exactly what had happened. He'd ruined it!

Then again, he had no idea what was going on. What were they doing exactly? Or, well, had been doing. If he hadn't exploded so suddenly, were they going toâ€œ do it? Here, in this place? It didn't feel quite right. Still, he felt like he had done something wrong.

"Ughhhh," he groaned, this time out of embarrassment and not arousal. He covered his face with his hands, unable to look her in the eye.
"I'm sorry."

"It's okay!" she said, but it wasn't okay. Not to him, anyway. The Gods really did love to mock him, putting him in such a situation. He hadn't lasted three minutes under her!

"No, it isn't. I screwed it up." Though I'm not entirely sure what I've screwed upâ€|

"No, you didn't, Hiccup. Stop it." She told him, her voice determined. But she dismounted him nonetheless. He felt guilty and ashamed for a moment, before she cuddled up beside him and pulled him

into a hug.

"It's fine," she told him, softly kissing the nape of his neck, "you didn't do anything wrong."

"Thanks!" he said sheepishly. He meant it. He felt enamoured, like a love-struck fool drunk on passion, so happy he could just scream into the clouds. He wanted to tell her he loved her right then, but found himself at a loss for courage. Elated, he just hugged her back, inhaling the scent of her hair. He could stay like this all night long, enjoying the giddiness of her embrace.

He was suddenly feeling very drowsy! And sticky.

"Uh. I need to, er. Clean myself up. Um."

She bolted backwards suddenly, like she'd been snapped at by a Terrible Terror. Hiccup immediately regretted opening his mouth and ruining that ethereal moment of between them.

"Yeah, sure. Just go ahead."

He didn't want to part from her. Nonetheless he stood up gingerly, his legs still unstable underneath his weight. He felt a pang of sadness when she turned her back on him, but maybe she was just trying to give him some privacy. He ambled over to the water's edge and kneeled. He cleaned himself off best he could, washed his face and his hands, drank water. He hadn't even noticed he was thirsty. It didn't matter that his pants and undies were practically soaked with water; in this heat, they would dry up fast. Besides, he welcomed the dampness of it.

He lolled his way back to Astrid's side, unable to shake off his sleepiness. He laid on the fur beside her and awaited in silent uncertainty. She didn't move or speak, so he hesitantly edged closer to her, carefully placing his hand on the curve of her waist. After a moment she finally entwined her fingers with his and gave a little squeeze; she might as well have tugged at his very heart.

Content, he drifted off into sleep and didn't even notice Toothless arriving back at camp, proudly holding a huge dead rabbit in his jaws.

The Night Fury looked at the two human youngsters with curiosity â€“ his companion and the girl he had always fawned over were now soundly lost in the land of dreams. Toothless dared not disturb them; he hadn't seen either of them in good spirits for several moons now. And whenever his human was at peace, so was he.

In the morrow he would scold the boy for not keeping watch and would feed them the rabbit. But all in its due time. He sat on his haunches, his vivid green eyes scanning the surroundings, standing vigilant against the things in the night. Had they seen what he had seen, they certainly would not be asleep.

A growl rumbled deep in his throat, a warning for any who dare approach them incautiously.

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER 8

* * *

><p>That's that! I love making out SO DARN MUCH mufufufufu. So there.</p>

Poor Hiccup. Practise makes perfect.

Bare in mind that in those days, people didn't have the sexual stimuli we have today. As someone in their sixties told me some time ago, "Heck, I'd get a boner just by holding her hand on a date." Which I kinda thought is... sweet? XD and I think hiccup and Astrid may have gotten into kissing and hugging at this point, but not exactly steamy-make-out sessions per se.

Also, I'm writing from my own experience and want it to be as realistic as possible within my writing skills... and I'm a woman, not a man, so there's that too. Haha. Hopefully I'll get it right somewhere along the line.

This time I wanted Hiccup's perspective. At the end, Toothless' (though I do want to include him more in the fic, I love Toothless and his relationship with Hiccup. BROTP!) But I may experiment later on, mainly with switching perspectives... I don't want to seem like some trigger-happy moron though, so it may take me some time until i'm comfortable with what I'm trying to do. So bare with me. :)

Did you notice anything out of the ordinary? Be my guest and tell me what a knucklehead I am! Or simply review because IT MAKES ME JOYOUS. Yes.

9. Silver Lining

Sorry if it's shorter than usual!

* * *

><p>Chapter 9: Silver Lining

* * *

><p>They made their way from the Academy on foot, their dragons walking by their side. Only Meatlug stayed behind with Stormfly, who'd been left to rest in one of the arena's chambers. The Chief figured that it would be the safest place for her while the Bunkerheads remained in Berk.</p>

"So, let me see if I can get this straight." Ruffnut still wasn't sure she followed everyone else's train of thought on the matter. "Hiccup flew away somewhere and won't be back for a few daysâ€|"

"Or so he said on that note of his," her brother interjected.

"Right," she conceded, "And now nobody knows where Astrid is. But Stormfly's here and she's hurt."

Everyone else nodded, except her brother who seemed as confused as

she was. "So now we think they've kidnapped Astrid," Ruffnut continued, referring to the foreigners. They assumed Astrid and Hiccup had taken off together in the middle of the night. Then they'd been made by the other tribe and captured.

"â€œ And they might have tried to kill Stormfly to make a point, " said Fishlegs, looking queasy. Ruffnut had been trying to avoid Fishlegs ever since they kissed last night. It was all sorts of strange and awkward and she'd been fending off his peculiar advances for months now â€œ how on Midgard had **he** ever even taken an interest in **her**? She certainly wasn't interested. At all. Like, no way. She had made her point on this several times. But she couldn't place her finger on whatever possessed her to do what she didâ€œ

Well she could, actually. All that booze. She just wished they'd all drank even more, so they'd not recall that unthinkable event. She felt a split-second of relief when they stumbled upon Stormfly in the Academy, followed by a bout of guilt.

Now she almost wished the others' teasing was the only thing on her mind â€œ in spite of everything, Ruffnut wasn't void of sympathy or worry for her peers. She was concerned for both Astrid and Hiccup.

"But there was a big storm last night. Who in their right minds would try ta fly off in tha' weather? And why did they leave Astrid's satchel attached to Stormfly?" Gobber asked, scratching his chin with his hook hand.

"Something's not right. They hadn't been talking for weeks. Astrid even avoided the trainings and the races whenever Hiccup was around. I don't get it." Snotlout said, the bags under his eyes more prominent from worry than from that evening's party-going.

"Maybe they were just pretending to be mad at each other, but secretly planned to run off together." Tuffnut guessed.

"We'll only get to the bottom of this after we've talked to the Bunkerheads. We might need to send out search parties, so you all have to be on your toes." Stoick said, resolute.

Ruffnut had always considered Stoick an impressive man. Their leader did indeed have a very strong presence â€œ his size alone was daunting â€œ, and it was in moments like these that she felt truly in awe of him. Not when he told her off for having fun pulling pranks or destroying stuff with her brother. Not when he yelled at them, not when he wielded his enormous hammer in battle.

It was his silent rage that struck the most fear; the way his eyes conveyed a murderous intent, when on the outside he appeared calm.

She had seen Hiccup make a face just like his father's once before. Yakfoot, a villager their elder by four years, made an insensitive joke about Hiccup's mother one night. That white-hot flash of anger in Hiccup's eyes was all the forewarning the other guy had, before Hiccup's fist plunged forward at full speed, effectively knocking Yakfoot out and putting everyone else on alert.

The fact that Hiccup spent five minutes jumping up and down on the spot, clutching his sore left hand as if it had a deadly wound, did little to mine the effect of his outburst on the people who'd watched the scene.

Ruffnut wondered what Hiccup would do all by himself, trying to help Astrid.

They made their way to the harbour, where they were met with somewhat of a commotion. Hooligans and Bunkerheads gathered in one crowd, whispering between them. The gang's curiosity peaked so instead of parting to go to their houses, they stuck with the Chief and followed him as he pushed through the pack of Vikings.

"What in Thor's name are you lot gawking at? Ohâ€| Frigga." Stoick cursed, before falling silent. There was a dead man in the middle of the curious crowd soaked in a puddle of his own dried up blood.

A foreigner, Ruffnut noted; she didn't feel sorry for him. The corpse was stiff and bluish, unmoving while the people around it were in a hubbub. There was a bloodied dagger near the corpse and an abandoned oar with some blood on it as well.

The crowd's buzz died down when Athole himself appeared; Ruffnut couldn't tell if that was his normal look or if he was scowling. The ugly man's face was twisted as if he'd drank a whole mug of Yaknog and then slammed his head with a spiked mace. Everyone stared at the two Chieftains.

"Two o' my men were attacked, Stoick."

"I only see one corpse," the Hooligan's Chief replied.

"The other one's alive, but all 'e r'members is a girl an' a weird 'elmet." Athole tilted his head sideways, pointing to a Bunkerhead man who was sitting down with his head in his hands, surrounded by some of his tribesmen.

"You think my people are responsible for this?" Anyone could feel the tension in Stoick's voice at that point. It was as taut as a rope giving in to the weight of a _JÃ¶tun_.

"I dun' think mine kill like this. Ye see, we prefer t'gut 'em while they're still warm. Keeps th' cold away almost as well as a woman's cunt does â€“ am I right, boys?"

The others cheered, even the one who'd been assaulted. As much as Ruffnut enjoyed mayhem and destruction, these men's untamed bloodlust and disregard for human life made her feel uneasy.

She saw from Stoick's bodily reaction that he was just as disconcerted about the whole scene as she was, if not more. His huge hands balled up into fists large enough to rival a hammer's head and equally as strong. His shoulders tensed visibly underneath his fur cape, and when he took a step towards Athole it was like an enraged mountain had just moved, dragging the landscape along with it.

The laughter from the foreigners ceased immediately.

"We should discuss this in private," Stoick seethed. Athole,

seemingly unimpressed, merely nodded. Before joining the tribal leaders, Gobber turned at the group of young Vikings and discretely warned them.

"Best you be headin' back to your homes. I'll check on Stormfly later, and remember: keep a low profile until we tell you it's time to head out in search of anyone, ye hear?"

Ruffnut watched as the crowd dispersed and the Bunkerheads collected the corpse of the fallen man like it was a sack of potatoes. It was her brother who yanked at her arm and spun her away from the scene.

"Come on sis, let's go home... For now."

* * *

><p>Astrid lay on her side, sleeping peacefully until the happy chirp of a bird awoke her. When her eyes finally fluttered open â€“ no longer burdened by overwhelming sleepiness â€“ it took her a moment to adjust to her surroundings.</p>

Her bare hands came into focus first, then the brown fur underneath her and, finally, the green mass of the surrounding forest.

She stretched her legs lazily, not bothering to stand up just yet, and as she did so her behind bumped into something soft. Someone. Astrid turned her head as far back as possible to get a good look.

Hiccup's face was relaxed in restful slumber, mouth hanging slightly agape. He looked nothing short of adorable. She smiled; she felt like she could stay there all morning, admiring the pattern of freckles upon his skin.

Astrid sighed, turning her eyes back towards the woods and resting her cheek on the palm of her hand. The sunlight wasn't entirely done creeping down the thick branches of the trees, hence bathing the whole place in a soft, tender atmosphere.

It was so peaceful and relaxingâ€¦ unlike last night.

It had been a strange night. As soon as it became dark she felt restless, even with the aid of the fire to illuminate the place. Said fire was now extinguished, she noted, merely a dull grey pile of wispy ashes forgotten on the forest ground.

Astrid's mind was beginning to gear in, starting to process her thoughts into all kinds of concerns â€“ about the whole situation, about Stormfly, about how stupid it was that neither of them had kept watch; but right then Hiccup mumbled her name in his sleep.

Her stomach overturned, memories of last night flooding her brain. Her yet unformed concerns shifted immediately towards images of their heated ministrations. Heat prickled at the skin of her cheeks and down between her legs.

In all honesty, Astrid didn't feel like it was right to blame him for his premature outburst of excitement. She understood, given the fact that she'd been close to coming undone as wellâ€¦

As if on cue Hiccup groaned her name this time, in a way that made the hairs in the back of her neck stand up. He moved in his sleep, unconsciously wanting to pull himself closer to her.

One thought crossed her mind. Should she? It would be so embarrassing. But he was asleep, so he wouldn't noticeâ€!

She scanned the area â€“ Toothless wasn't around again, but there was a huge dead rabbit hidden under Hiccup's leather bag and the saddle. Most welcomed food; but food wasn't the relief she sought right now.

She testily wiggled backwards until their bodies were touching and, taking in a deep breath, downright rubbed her behind against his hips. He mumbled and groaned again, still asleep, but his body reacted accordingly.

It was a strange thing she was doing right then, revelling in the satisfaction of feeling him grow against her â€“ while he slept. If he were to wake up, she'd die of embarrassment. But it felt thrilling and naughty, and right now she craved this adrenaline kick.

His fingers suddenly dug into the swell of her hips and for a moment she thought he might have roused from his sleep. But he hadn't; he was just dreaming. Probably about her. And him. Doing things to each other.

There it was, that pressure once again building up, and up, andâ€!

Strange. The pressure Astrid felt down there was actually becoming a little uncomfortable now. Not that it was a bad thing, actually. Just strange. There was a different sort of tightness, mingled with the one she felt from all the contact with Hiccup.

Ah, yes. Human nature at its best; she desperately needed to relieve herself.

Astrid picked herself up, careful not to stretch too much or her bladder would burst at the seams. She stole a glance at Hiccup and couldn't help but giggle; he was now sprawled on the floor belly-up, his tunic riding up his waist slightly, the prominent bulge between his legs gradually pulling at the fabric.

This was her doing.

There was a mix of hilarity and yearning that hit her right then, pulling her lips into a devious smile. Astrid made a mental note of attending to _it_ later.

She headed off to find a decent place where she could crouch and just do her thing. She walked away from Hiccup and the river stream for a few minutes, drinking in the quietness of the now tranquil forest.

After she was done, she took a proper deep breath and finished stretching out her muscles, squeezing the last bits of tension away from her body. She took a look around; it all seemed beautiful and magical once again, in such a contrast from what it had felt like

after the sun had set.

She shuddered, remembering the creeping feeling of despair that had taken over her; it had nearly forced her mind into a loop of frightening questions and fears: what if Stormfly is dead, what if my parents will never take me back, what if we never leave this place, what if I lose Hiccup, what ifâ€?

It had ultimately driven her to seek comfort in Hiccup's embrace, in his kiss and in his touch. Maybe if he hadn't been there, if she'd landed in that place alone, she wouldn't have made it past the night.

No. Preposterous.

Astrid was a strong woman, independent and realistic. She would have snapped out of that idiotic bout of insecurity and dread and she would have pulled through. She had already mulled over this situation with Hiccup far past what she should ever have allowed herself to.

Now, she'd come to the conclusion.

She had this inexplicable need for him. Her loss of control last night was the ultimate proof for her, and this irrational longing that drove her into doing the dumbest of things was making her both miserable and high up in the clouds.

It was a strange state of mind to be in. In spite of the Integration â€“ the end of the war with the dragons brought her an inner peace she never knew she would find, and she grew softer as the years went by â€“ she still had this fixed idea of Vikinghood and how Viking women ought to not be swept off their feet in an epic swoon each time their desired man so much as touched their hair.

Yet here she was, tingling at the very thought of having Hiccup's hands â€“ Hel, Hiccup's anything â€“ pressing up against her.

I'm a hopeless case, she concluded silently to herself, only letting out an exasperated sigh to match her slumping shoulders.

Then she heard a noise. A strange rustling somewhere to her left that felt as out of place in this island as she was. She thought of calling out to Hiccup, but that couldn't have been him; what were the chances he'd managed to find her? She had wound up wandering off a little, lost in her internal monologue.

There was that noise again; a little bit more to the left than previously.

Her body tensed out of sheer instinct. The muscles in her calves and thighs pumped into position, her hands prepared for any sudden movement, her centre coiled in anticipation, her eyes peeled wide open.

She held her breath and waited in a still stance, unwilling to cause any sound that might block the one she was listening for.

The moment she heard it again, she pinpointed its direction

immediately and lunged forward. Only now she realized she had no weapon on her, but it didn't even matter. She chased the sound â€“ it was moving away now â€“ and sped up as soon as she saw the shadow of some animal jumping in the tree canopy ahead of her.

The chase was long, and by the time she halted she had to hold her knees to catch her breath. Had she just been hallucinating, chasing a shadow in her mind through the forest?

She heard the sound again, this time getting closer. Closer. Closer. Whatever it was, it was just about to appear from behind those trees.

Rightâ€| there.

Astrid unwillingly let out a surprised "oh!" as the creature gracefully sprang out from behind the greenery.

A dragon.

It was about twice the size of a terrible terror, but in no means similar to one. Its softly shimmery scales were of a metallic grey resembling dark, liquid silver. The colour almost seemed to shift and glimmer with the dragon's movements, irradiating a strange sort of luminescence. It had its leathery wings folded by its sides, the distance from the bend to the tip promising a wide wingspan.

It treaded slowly yet deliberately in front of Astrid, its muscled legs digging into the ground like some sort of display of dominance, but otherwise showing no signs of aggressiveness. The cat-like elegance with which it moved and its body type heavily reminded Astrid of Toothless, but the smaller dragon's limbs and features were much sharper and defined. More angled, less softened.

It had a long, strong neck atop which sat an angled, reptilian jaw sided by small fins that seemed to be quivering. The elongated shape of its head was almost smooth, save for two very small black horns near the back of it and the spikes, which started shyly just above its snout and merged into a dorsal fin that trailed all the way through its spine to the very tip of its long, thin tail.

It really was a **long** tail.

The silver-grey dragon had long limbs, with the proportion and movement of a mountain lion's. Its front paws almost reminded Astrid of a human hand, with five long fingers at the end; but no claws. The front legs bent backwards at the joint like a human's arm would, but the hind legs were more like a Nadder's: a powerful, short thigh, a knee that bent like that of a person's and an ankle that bent the opposite way.

Protuberant scales spiked out from the joint of its elbows and ankles. Its waist was thinner in comparison to its chest. Despite its size, it held its head up majestically.

The most striking feature had to be its deep amethyst eyes. Clever eyes, analysing her every movement; its pupils contracted and dilated vertically, as if going in and out of focus.

They both held their stand-off for a few moments, none of them

breaking eye contact. It was downright unnerving. Astrid could feel the restlessness welling within the beast as it watched her, warily keeping its distance and guarded stance.

Astrid tried to do what Hiccup usually did and approached the dragon slowly, her hand outstretched to it, making an effort to appear as friendly as possible. But then the dragon thrashed its whip-like tail about, slashing at trees and bushes and plants and flowers, cutting them all with one swift swipe, its nostrils flared.

A warning not to come any closer, Astrid thought grimly.

Then she noted something ****else**** at her back. Something sharp and hard prodded her between her shoulder blades.

Frigga. She'd been so focused on the dragon she didn't even notice someone approaching from behind.

A female voice barked something Astrid could not understand; upon her silence, the pressure of the blade on Astrid's back increased. The woman repeated her words slowly, menacingly, nothing short of a growl.

"I can't understand you," Astrid replied firmly.

Oddly enough, as soon as she said the words the silver dragon seemed to relax a little, tilting its head sideways in curiosity. Its pupils dilated, and it now seemed to resemble more a curious cat than it did a preying mountain lion.

"Ah. Well well well," said the woman behind her, "What have we here? A Viking, is it?"

The voice still had that dangerous edge to it but it was more tranquil; the woman's Norse was speckled with a foreign accent Astrid couldn't pinpoint.

"Yes, I am."

The woman hummed approvingly. The tip of the weapon no longer dug so deeply into Astrid's back.

"So far away from homeâ€| What is your business here, little Viking girl?"

Astrid wanted to snap back; she wasn't a girl, and most certainly not a little one. However, she was weapon less. Too big a disadvantage to be playing games with.

"I came here by accident," Astrid replied honestly, "I don't know where I am."

The silver dragon seemed to be squinting at her. There was a short pause before the woman spoke, her voice ringing with suspicion.

"That's not possible. Tell me the truth, little girl. Who did you come with?"

Astrid couldn't tell on Hiccup. "I came here alone."

The dragon hissed, and the woman increased the pressure of the weapon on Astrid's back again. This was getting repetitive.

"You lie," said the woman calmly. "I'll find your companions. Then we can have a little talk. Alaelding, " she called, and to Astrid's surprise the silver dragon leapt forth and sniffed at Astrid.

She automatically took a step back, but hissed when she felt the blade cut through fabric and skin. Sweat mingled with blood, running down her back.

"Careful, now. This is sharp," the woman warned teasingly. The dragon took a long whiff and then turned to point to the route where Astrid had come from, its long neck and head stretched like an arrow; surprisingly enough, the dragon's front left paw was now lifted as well, one clawless index aligned and outstretched to point in the same direction.

"On we march, then," the woman said. Astrid needn't be told twice. She didn't need the weapon to cut through her back even further.

Both women followed the lead of the silver dragon. Astrid's mind wheeled; she didn't want to lead them to Hiccup. She didn't want to turn both of them into prisoners; then again, she had no idea what the woman was thinking of. All Astrid knew was that the foreigner had relaxed her grip on the weapon when Astrid spoke to her in Norse.

Perhaps she was friendlyâ€¦ well, as far as friendly came in that situation. Astrid was determined to see her capturer; she stole a quick peep backwards.

"Hey, eyes up front!"

With that quick glance, all Astrid could manage to see was that the woman, who towered well above her, had skin much darker than hers. A southerner. The weapon between them was a thick wooden spear.

They were getting closer to where Astrid and Hiccup had spent their night. Astrid needed to do something; she needed to warn Hiccup.

The silver dragon came to an abrupt halt and hissed loudly at the trees in front of it. The woman stopped and gripped Astrid's shoulder loosely with her free hand.

"What is it, Alaelding?"

That small instant when the pressure of the spear went amiss and the woman seemed to be distracted, was the moment Astrid chose to make a move. She shot her hand backwards while spinning on her toes, pushing the weapon far from her torso and jumping away.

The foreigner seemed to be caught unaware for a split second, but recovered quickly. She manoeuvred the spear with great speed, whipping it around and above her tall figure before swinging it down, bringing it behind Astrid.

The wooden handle connected behind the Viking's calves and her legs

gave in from the shock of the impact. Astrid fell to her knees, spitting a string of curses at her attacker. She made to lunge forward in order to strike back, but suddenly the foreigner fell upon her, impeding any further movement.

Yet it was not an attack; it was a protective stance. She hissed at Astrid, crouching above her with the spear steadily pointed toward the imminent threat, "Be still, there's something there!"

Something large moved, hidden behind the density of the forest. The dragon's wings spread out like silvery sails on a ship and its hiss turned into a solid roar; despite its small size, its vocalization rumbled like thunder rolling from a heavy storm, making Astrid's chest reverberate even long after the dragon became silent.

The bulk behind the canopies stilled at the warning, as if to ponder its next move. Astrid feared it might be some large predator, preparing to strike upon its kill; devoid of weapon, all she could do was make a run for it.

The dark figure moved forward. Slowly, Toothless' snarling head appeared from behind the greenery, eyes menacingly locked on the smaller dragon, teeth bared. He was poised to attack, his head hanging low from his tense shoulders, his body coiled in the forewarning of a mighty pounce.

"Thank Thor," Astrid whispered under her breath.

But then the silver dragon's wings fell to its sides, retracting against its body. Astrid could only see its back, since it was facing Toothless head-on, but the smaller creature's head was now tilted sideways in a much more relaxed stance.

Astrid watched in disbelief as Toothless' body language shifted to the exact opposite of menacing. His teeth retracted, his pupils dilated; he outstretched his front paws on the ground and lifted his quads up in the air like some dog about to wag its tail, and as soon as he cooed "was he greeting its opponent? " the smaller dragon jumped forward in a playful tackle.

Silver and black tangled mirthfully and rolled on the forest floor like long-lost friends. Astrid was so stunned she didn't realize the woman was no longer crouching above her, but standing behind her.

What exactly was going on?

"Did you find her, bud?" Called a muffled, distressed voice somewhere behind Toothless. Hiccup came stumbling in from the same place his dragon had emerged from just moments ago, sweat-soaked hair clinging to his forehead, his cheeks and his neck red from chasing the Night Fury around.

He laughed goofily at the dragons before he noticed the two women, and then made a face like he'd just seen a pink sheep wearing a party dress on his dining table.

"Hiccup!" Both women exclaimed at the same time. They then slowly, warily turned their heads toward one another in utter surprise, an awkward silence filling the air between them. The foreigner seemed

apologetical now, like a child who'd unwillingly bullied the friend of a friend. The dragons continued their banter, completely oblivious to the tension between the three people, shaking their heads in a synchronized greeting.

Hiccup was about to say something but choked on his words and tilted his head, hilariously in the same manner Toothless did, mouth agape and one hand scratching the back of his neck. He knew this person. How?

At this point, Astrid was completely befuddled. Her eyes darted from the tall tan woman to the playful dragons, to her equally astounded boyfriend and then back to the woman until she became dizzy. She stood up, now feeling the sting on her calves where she'd been whipped, and rubbed her temples calmly.

"Someone better start filling me in."

* * *

><p>END of CH.9

* * *

><p>Well well, looks like they've got company!<p>

The silver dragon's name (_Alaelding_) is a conjugation of _ala_ (supposedly old Norse for "bringer") and _elding_ ("dawn, methinks"). Or, well, I tried. It seemed cheesy enough to me. :D

is shot

Sorry if it's somewhat rushed, but I didn't get much of a chance to doublecheck my reading, otherwise I'd never get this posted.

I'll be travelling without my laptop so the next update will be after January, most likely...

And as soon as January begins I'm going to kill myself studying for two months. Exams. Love them.

I could try to squeeze in another chapter before I leave, but I doubt it. Let's see how it goes.

10. The Way Out?

Sorry it took me a long time to update. Life's been taking up way too much of my time and inspiration. XD

Shoutout to my lovely reviewers - especially** DragonTrainer98** , who inflated my ego, haha! Thank you. Also, **Q-A The Authoress** , **Cyclone20** , **Ferdoos** as always, and **Vondrakenhof** .

I knowwww I have some messages to read and reply to, but please bare with me. I've been very much zombie-like in my spare time. :)

* * *

><p>CHAPTER TEN - The Way Out?

* * *

><p>"Well?" Astrid tapped her foot impatiently on the ground, arms crossed in front of her chest, glaring daggers at the still surprised Hiccup and stealing suspicious glances at the female with the sun-kissed skin.</p>

"Astridâ€| meet Elleanora," Hiccup said, gesturing between the two women with his hands. The look on his face clearly suggested he still couldn't quite believe what was going on at that moment. It was as if he'd come across a friendly apparition; but an apparition, nonetheless.

"Hello," Astrid deadpanned with undisguised animosity, fixating her scowl on the new arrival, who did look as stunned as Hiccup; if not more.

"You may call me Ellea. We meet at last," the woman replied back cryptically after a small pause, albeit in a much warmer tone than Astrid's. "I never thought I would see you in such a place! How did you arrive here?" Elleanora asked, her untraceable accent more noticeable.

"Well, that's actually the longest storyâ€|" Hiccup began, probably unsure of where to begin. "We basically crashed here."

The woman seemed preoccupied, a crease appearing on her forehead as she pondered the words. Her prominent, dark eyebrows knitted thoughtfully over her sharp amber eyes.

"Crashed? Then you did not sail here? You flew by dragon?"

Hiccup nodded hesitantly, then shrugged, struggling with the words. He wasn't even sure how they'd gotten there. "I guessâ€| you could say thatâ€| Uh, can you tell us where we are?" Hiccup asked hopefully, "Because we have **no** clue."

"I canâ€| it will be easier to show you on the map at camp. You must both come, and hurry. It is not safe here."

Astrid didn't move from her spot; she was trying to sort things out in her head, but it simply wasn't working out for her. She needed answers â€" and fast, before she could even begin to equate what her next move would be.

"So, waitâ€| Five minutes ago you had that _thing_", Astrid gestured accusingly at the offending spear, "pointed at my back, and now you're trying to help us?"

She wasn't even sure if help was the right word; Hiccup might know this person, but Astrid certainly didn't, and she had no idea whether the camp was safe or not.

"I could not tell friend from foe," Elleanora said, bowing her head apologetically. "Would you not have done the same?"

Astrid mulled over this for a moment; yes, she probably would have done the exact same thingâ€| But she didn't want to give that woman the satisfaction. She settled for a quirk of her lips and the

faintest of nods, nearly imperceptible; her hands were now firmly planted on her hips in a determined stance as she continued to glower at the stranger.

Hiccup stood there silently, watching the tension build up with a nervous tap of his prosthetic on the ground; until he noticed the small silver dragon, who was now purring by Toothless' side, tongue lolling from its open mouth.

"Oh! Is thatâ€¢?"

There was a flash of silver as Alaelding jumped through the air, landing on Hiccup's chest and licking his face vigorously. He laughed heartily and scratched her jaw, eliciting a round of delightful purrs from the scaly creature.

"You remember me! Wow, you've grown so muchâ€¢! You look _so_ different. I _really_ need to draw you again! Look at you! " Hiccup was gushing. Truly _gushing_.

This was the last straw.

"Someone ****definitely**** needs to start filling me in," Astrid all but growled, the stress of the recent events making her feel nearly as edgy as she had been last night "before ****anyone**** starts talking about ****anything**** else!"

Astrid snapped her head when the stranger started to laugh, and only then did she actually see what Elleanora looked like.

She did not appear to be older than either of them, but Astrid couldn't pinpoint her age â€" strangely, the velvety voice had seemed to belong to a more mature person. She was tall, taller than Hiccup was, and her jaw was strong yet smooth, her cheekbones defined and proud.

The dark skin, peculiar amber eyes, black hair and pronounced facial features â€" the most fitting word to describe the stranger was _exotic_, just like the forest they were all engulfed in. Her pronounced curves were deceitful enough; this was no domestic woman, but one used to fighting. And light on her feet.

"Who better to explain how we met," Elleanora said, waving her hand over to Hiccup, "than the Dragon Whisperer himself? He will tell you as we march. No time to lose â€" daylight is a precious resource in this gods-forsaken place."

Astrid merely rolled her eyes at the term used to describe Hiccup. At this point, nearly everything managed to get on her nerves â€" especially all the jewellery dangling from Elleanora's ears, arms and neck.

Astrid, who'd always trained herself hard when she was younger, wound up developing a great indifference to jewellery, actually even considering a hindrance as it could get snagged somewhere during a fight. Trinkets got in the way, she'd always told herself.

She looked at Hiccup straight in the eye, unafraid of being blunt.
"Can we trust her?"

"We can. She's a friend," he replied, nodding reassuringly as he placed one hand over his chest and, with the other, reached out for her. But Astrid inched away after he touched her arm. She spared the woman one last glance before sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose, as if that could help her get her thoughts back into place.

Sometimes she still felt like she couldn't entirely trust Hiccup's judgement on people, but right now they would just have to wing it. They were lost in an unknown place, tired and disoriented, and their supplies were dwindling fast.

"Fine. It's not like we have any other alternative, anyway."

Three people and two dragons — the silver one perched atop her person's shoulders — made their way back to Astrid and Hiccup's camp firstly, to gather their belongings. They praised Toothless for catching such a fine rabbit for dinner and went on their way, hacking at the greenery as they marched.

Astrid wanted a private explanation as to who Elleanora was, but she didn't want to be overly obvious about her disquiet. She just elbowed Hiccup in the ribs as they made their way through the forest, and with her head gestured to the foreigner.

"Ah, right. We met in Lysminnae," Hiccup said, realizing he hadn't explained yet, "when I went there last year. Ellea's husband was the one who —"

"She's married?" Astrid asked, interrupting him. Hiccup nodded.

"Yeah, he was the one who approached me. Anyway, they'd stolen an egg —"

"Not stolen," Ellea cut through, waving her index finger about in the air, "merely claimed it."

Hiccup sighed and nodded. "We'll just agree to disagree on that one, again." Elleanora just snickered and shook her head, so Hiccup continued.

"Anyway, he came up to me and said he knew who I was. Called me the 'Dragon Whisperer', " Hiccup said, his lips curved with an amused chuckle as he imitated a voice thicker than his, "and said he had something I needed to see."

"A dragon egg?" Astrid asked aloud, not really intending to sound that interested in the tale.

"Exactly," he confirmed, nodding. "It was a very weird egg!"

"Wait, you told me about this!" Astrid thought she might have heard this before. But the details about an exotic-looking woman and husband were novelties to her. "You said the egg was a dull grey, but the texture was~~â€|~~ velvet, right?"

"Yeah!" he nodded excitedly, nearly hitting his face on a branch, "And nobody could understand how it was possible that an egg no

bigger than a hand could have that sort of texture, **and** be unbreakable. Oh, and warm to the touch." Hiccup gestured with his hands in the air, referring to the size of the egg. "Do you remember me telling you this?"

"I do," Astrid said, leaping over a particularly large tree's root, "But at the time you said 'they', whenever you mentioned people. You never talked about aâ€| woman." The particular detail was irritating Astrid for some reason. Not that it would have made a difference, but still. Hiccup shrugged distractedly; this was probably an element he didn't pay much mind to, anyway.

Astrid remembered the story well; about how Hiccup and some acquaintances had found themselves in a bit of a trouble. A group of adventurers â€“ or so Hiccup said â€“ who'd stumbled upon the very odd egg after raiding a roman vessel.

One of them had been just about to dispose of it â€“ who would care for a heavy, round stone in the midst of gold and silver? â€“ when he felt the bizarre velvety texture and the temperature of it. It was such a puzzling discovery that they couldn't throw the object out.

Not long afterwards, they ported in Lysminnae and, by fate, stumbled upon Hiccup. He was invited into their ship, and completely befuddled upon discovering the egg.

"You told me Toothless was the one who hatched the egg by breathing fire on itâ€| what happened, exactly?" Astrid had always wondered exactly **whose** idea had it been to blast a small egg with fire that way, but Hiccup had merely brushed her off and told her it had worked, and that was all that mattered. Astrid had found it odd; Hiccup wasn't much of a man for risquÃ© experiments like that.

"Ah, that was funny part," Ellea laughed from a little farther ahead, breaking her silence. Hiccup didn't seem to find her intervention the least bit amusing.

"Really not all that funny â€“" he started, raising his hands up in the air and signalling for Ellea to stop; but she didn't.

"Our ship was raided by some angry roman bastards, right there in port," Elleanora declared, as if nothing too serious had happened. Astrid glared straight at Hiccup; he hadn't told her anything about an attack. By romans, of all people!

"It wasn't **that** bad," Hiccup groaned, clearly unamused by the memory. "And all they wanted was their stuff back, really. Stuff you guys took."

"They were not polite in way of asking," Ellea pointed out, apparently indifferent to the fact that she'd been the one who'd taken items from their original owners. "Then we had to find other ship, because of Toothless breathing dragon fire on the roman slobs," Ellea said, the entertainment in her voice suggesting she had thoroughly enjoyed watching a dragon shoot fireballs at romans.

"You mean you **stole** another ship," Hiccup interjected, crossing his arms over his chest out of habit â€“ and nearly losing his balance because of this when he tried to jump over a large

shrubbery.

"Commandeered it is the term I believe? And you helped."

"Well, I wouldn't say I **volunteered** for it!"

Astrid rolled her eyes at the argument; clearly there was a difference in their moral standards. Hiccup was too noble a man to be the raiding sort of Viking, that's for sure. "Just get on with it. What happened next?"

"Long story short: one of Toothless' fireballs hit the egg by mistake!" Hiccup had stopped dead in his tracks without even realizing it, gesturing to the ground of the forest as if he were re-living the scene right there. "And the thing just bursts into flames for a few seconds, but the wood caught on fire right away. Then I don't know why, but Toothless just jumped in and grabbed the egg in his mouth."

By now Hiccup's hands were near his face, shaking over it in dramatic motions, lost in the visuals of what he was re-living, "And we kind of had to clear the ship and everything. We didn't get all the stuff out, but Toothless had the egg in his mouth. He placed it on the floor of the docks and it was covered in dragon spit and it smelled like fish, you know? But it was so cool and it was just this red shell kind of thing. It started melting and ."

"And Alaelding was born!" Ellea concluded with a proud smile, gesturing at the silver dragon on her shoulder, who cooed. "Ran straight toward me with these big purple eyes and I just fell in love!"

The beautiful silver dragon looked nothing like the sketch Hiccup had added to the Book of Dragons, though, and Astrid's confusion completely showed in her face.

"She sort of looked like a grey newt when she was born! Oh, sorry," Hiccup held up his hands placatingly as both master and dragon glared at him. "I really need to update that entry on the Book of Dragons. And find a proper name for it."

Astrid remembered it; the one Tuffnut had lovingly named Mini Mudgruntle. It definitely did **not** look like anything mud-related anymore, and it was no longer the size of a hand.

"She has name; Alaelding," Ellea repeated sternly as if Hiccup had forgotten something terribly important, turning her back to the couple and resuming her march. Toothless warbled up ahead, jumping excitedly in his place, and Alaelding bounced after him.

"I meant for her species." Hiccup droned. Astrid noticed his curiosity only peaked the more he looked at the dragon. She found herself strangely interested in it, too.

"She has changed a lot, and I believe is still growing. She gets more heavy by the weeks."

How strange. Most of the dragons they knew would grow big within a few months, except for the Terrible Terrors.

"So after Alael was born, Hiccup helps us learn more about her. He didn't _want_ to help us get the new ship," Ellea laughed, obviously finding Hiccup's ideals to be somewhat comical, "but taught us many things of the dragons. For that, we are grateful. Knowledge is wealth, and wealth is power."

Astrid was caught unaware; this woman hadn't initially seemed like the type of person who sought greater awareness. What kind of a pirate was she?

"Now, I need to know what has happened. How you two landed in here. This is not a place easy to reach from where you live," Elleanora said, concern now scratching her voice, "I cannot understand how you got here."

Hiccup sighed, scratching the back of his head in that nervous quirk of his.

"We were pulled into a storm while we were flyingâ€|" he began by saying. Ellea stumbled gracelessly and turned to look at Hiccup with wide, startled eyes, a flash of wild curiosity behind her stare.

"Tell me all about it."

He told her, leaving out the details of his and Astrid's predicament regarding his engagement. Ellea listened intently from then on, never interrupting. By the end of it, she looked heavily pensive.

"We must move quickly," she kept repeating. "You have gone too far in this wilderness. The deeper inside the heart of it, the more terrible the nights become."

Astrid and Hiccup exchanged glances, and she knew immediately they shared the same thought. Last night had beenâ€| startling, to say the least.

"What do you mean, the nights become terrible?" Astrid asked.

Ellea looked back for a moment, "How did you feel yesterday, after the sun gave its way to the moon?"

Astrid mulled over it; she'd felt lost, hurt, confused, sadâ€| scared.

"Hopeless," Hiccup replied, his eyes fixed upon Astrid. "Like I'd lost everything I had worth fighting for."

Yes; Astrid had felt hopeless too. She just nodded, then, seeing the way Hiccup looked at her. I don't want to lose you. I can't.

"You see, this forest bathes us with beauty and warmth by day," Ellea said, oblivious to the lovers' moment, "but when _nÃ¤at_ comes and steals away the sunâ€|" She paused with a heavy breath. "Men have dared into this forest before. Of the few who came back, even fewer stayed sane. This place does something to you. Night steals away any illusion of beauty brought by sunlight; it fills your mind with worrisome thoughts and your heart with fears. The more nights in here, the worse the fear gets. Until it takes over."

"How do you know that?" Hiccup asked; Astrid noticed him walking closer to her, now; she made no movement to pull away.

"We seek information before going places on our business, how do you think?" Ellea replied with a humourless chuckle. "Survivors told tales. People speak in rumours. That is why we camp and sleep by the edge of the forest; it is safest. All these islands carry dangers."

"Islandsâ€¦ You mean there's more than one like this?" Astrid wanted to know as much information as possible. The questions burned the tip of her tongue with an unrestrained rush; it was like the more information she was given, the more she needed to know.

"There are three, people say. This is the second we visit, and have been here four days and three nights. We have one more isle to search."

This definitely had Astrid's curiosity peaked; she wondered what it was about this place that was worth the danger. It had to be good. "What are you searching for?"

"I cannot tell; it is but a job. We need not believe in what we are asked, but we will do it for the right price," Ellea replied, looking back with a faint smile on her lips. "We must make a living, as do others."

Hiccup snorted then, but said nothing else.

"You should know of this: you were lucky to have been together. They say this place is cursed, but its magic cannot taint enamoured minds so easily."

Astrid worked the information in her mind, thinking back to the urgent desperation with which she had sought solace in Hiccup's embrace. It all made sense now; they had kept each other sane through the night. If Astrid had walked away as she wanted, if Hiccup hadn't gone after her and convinced her they needed to stay togetherâ€¦ Astrid didn't want to think about it. Her recklessness and clouded judgement could have had even worse consequences; she was angry at herself, for her lack of judgement... Yet grateful at the same time. A strange sense of thankfulness descended upon her then.

She could find no words to express herself; at least, not now. So she did what she felt was right â€“ she gently took his hand and pulled it to her face, kissing it so softly it was as if her lips never even met his skin. Hiccup gazed at her fondly, smiling, he too understanding the implications of Ellea's words.

They made the rest of their trip to camp wordlessly, hands held together, as Toothless and Ellea lead the way through a path that had already been cleared.

The sun's position indicated the afternoon was well under way when they finally arrived at the camp. It was just outside of the forest, at that point where trees began to give way to sand. The beach was long and hot, unforgiving to incautious bare feet. And in sea, many yards away, a heavy vessel floated calmly upon the unstirring waters, firmly anchored to the oceanic floor. There were three small boats ashore, certainly the ones they used to travel from the beach to the

ship.

Some people huddled around tents; some were cooking, others seemed to be simply dozing it off. A pair of men sat at an improvised table, looking at a map. They hardly took notice of the arriving group, until Ellea clicked her tongue.

At the signal, Alaelding carefully jumped from her master's shoulders. Right before she hit the ground, a set of pitch black claws " long and sinuous " erupted from her digits. As if that weren't unexpected enough, the silver dragon broke into a wild sprint, reaching the camp within a heartbeat.

"She's fast!" Hiccup exclaimed, his eyes widening as he admired the dash of silver running toward the camping site. "The only dragons I've seen moving faster than that on land are Speed Stingers."

The people from the camp took notice of them and waved; some stopped mid-motion, inspecting the newcomers with studious apprehension.

"Does she have claws?" Astrid asked Ellea directly, as her eyes scanned the unknown faces.

"She does, yet keeps them in! But she cannot fly," Ellea answered, "so please don't mention it. She becomes a littleâ€¦ sensitive."

"Wait. Your dragon is afraidâ€¦ of flying?" Astrid thought it made no sense; Alaelding had wings wonderfully fit for flight.

"It is the only trait she and my husband seem to share," Ellea replied with a smile.

"Apparently we also have to share you," said a man, rising from his place at the spindly table, "and the food." The last remark was clearly meant for Alaelding, who promptly ignored it and just sat on her haunches, lazily stretching her wings before she jumped playfully after Toothless.

The moment he fixed his attentions on them, however, he seemed taken aback. Surprised, just as Ellea had been.

He certainly matched Stoick the Vast in height, and his chest was, arguably, almost as wide. Brown hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, strands of it falling haphazardly around his face, a trimmed beard shading his angled jawline. The sleeveless, faded blue shirt revealed muscled arms that were littered in scars; he had a particularly nasty one on the side of his neck, a pattern of mismatching skin criss-crossing like a snake. He seemed to count less than 30 springs, but his black eyes and the marks on his arms told the tale of someone much older, much more tired.

In just a few quick strides, he made it to their side. He bowed to Astrid, first, before taking Hiccup's hand in a hearty shake; an incredulous look still stamped on his face. Astrid noticed his left hand was gloved, in spite of the intense heat.

"This is my husband. Mateo, this is Astrid." Ellea waved her hand between the two; Mateo nodded in understanding. Clearly, he'd heard

of her before.

"How did you two get here?" he asked, eyeing them " and Toothless, who was sniffing him curiously " with arched eyebrows. "Did you **fly** all the way here ?" The way his face contorted at the thought was a pretty obvious indication that he was not, by any means, a fan of soaring up in the skies.

"A tale for another time. They are tired, and need rest and food. After they fill their bellies, we will try to make sense of all of this," Ellea shook her head and sighed, rubbing her temples with her hands, sparing a wary glance at her company. "Come, you will meet the rest of my crew. Taste our food, and leave words for later. We have used salt _claimed_ from the useless romans." Elleanora gestured toward the pot above the crackling fire, clearly taking a jab at Hiccup by mentioning the origin of the food's seasoning.

And so, Astrid was quickly introduced to the other members of this group of marauders. They didn't appear threatening, but they also didn't look friendly; she could hear them whispering between themselves as she and Hiccup walked past, fingers pointed mostly at Toothless. The Night Fury looked wary, but not aggressive.

Astrid's gaze was inevitably dragged toward the ship swaying in the still, deep blue waters; at least they finally had a way to get out of this tropical maze. But there was **no** way she'd trust these people anytime soon.

She tried focusing on the names, but she was far too hungry and thirsty to bother registering most of them. Roberto, Kalis, Agaurd, Herios, Davi, Nyvam. Other names that sounded very foreign to her, but the only sound she truly focused on right now was that of her hungry stomach. It had been over two days since her last full meal, and the fact that she hadn't been feeding properly in the prior week only worsened it.

Astrid helped Hiccup remove the saddle from Toothless' body; it was useless until the mechanic tailfin was repaired, and there were no tools in camp set for the task. Toothless was hungry, and without his working tailfin he could not fish, Hiccup explained. But Mateo said that the fish near the coast were lazy and easy to catch.

As she waited for her meal, Astrid watched Toothless bound comically down the white sand of the beach, hurl himself carelessly yet gracefully into the salty water, and " quickly enough " emerge while chewing some fish in his mouth.

She and Hiccup were given water and cheese, bread and fish, then some fruits Astrid had never tasted. One of the women began skinning the overgrown rabbit while they ate; Astrid watched the task absent-mindedly, but after the intake of food her brain began gaining focus. She noticed people seemed to be communicating in an assortment of languages Astrid wasn't used to, although most of them seemed to at least be capable of scratching up some basic Norse.

"Mateo, bring the map," Ellea spoke softly, gesturing at her husband, "we should speak inside our tent."

Their tent was the largest, enough to fit about ten people inside. There was a large feather mattress on the left corner, surrounded by

silks and colourful pillows, separated by a painted wooden screen; at the centre stood a small table with three single benches, writing sticks and scrolls scattered across its surface. Toothless could have fit inside, but he'd been up all night long; so he just ambled into the forest, hung himself upside-down by the tail on a sturdy tree, and dozed off to sleep. Alaelding chose to sleep by Toothless' side, climbing the tree like a cat and resting languidly upon the same branch.

Mateo closed the tent, granting them all privacy. He lit up a candle and stood by the table, inviting them all to sit down.

It was time for explanations; Hiccup repeated the story on how they'd gotten there. Astrid watched Mateo's demeanour â€“ like he was having a hard time believing all of this. His silent disbelief grew tenser with each word; his eyes seemed to darken by the instant.

Mateo cleared the table and unravelled the large map upon the gnawed surface, stretching it out, its edges falling off the furniture's frame. "This is your Barbaric Archipelagoâ€|" he said, his index finger pointing to the familiar formation of islands. Then he dragged his finger across it; across the ocean, a large area with no lands nearby, until it finally stopped. "This is where we are."

The air was still with silence and withheld breaths as the information sunk in.

This was impossible. It was too far away.

"I can't believe thisâ€| Where are we?" Hiccup gasped, his head shaking; out of shock, he wrapped his right arm around Astrid's waist and pulled her to him. She felt his fist clench, gripping the fabric of her shirt, unintentionally causing a sudden jolt of pain to her ribs. She winced, yet he failed to notice. "How is this possible?"

"We do not know the answers for this," Ellea said, two fingers toying distractedly with a strand of her black hair. "But we may know of someone who could help."

Mateo shifted uncomfortably; he glanced at his wife with solemn apprehension. She locked her eyes on his, determined to show she was set on her intentions, and spoke to him in a language Astrid couldn't understand. But the tone in her voice, it was unmistakeable. They argued, softly at first; however their voices began to rise, as if they had forgotten about their guests.

"We must help them, as he and his dragon helped us!" Ellea barked back in Norse, determined to end the conversation.

There was a small pause; a hint of hesitation. "As you wish," Mateo replied at last, also in Norse. Then he turned to Hiccup, "You do deserve this much. But you should come clean; why would you go flying with such bad weather? Only fools would risk such a thing."

Mateo was sticking his finger in the wound; Hiccup didn't want to go there.

Ellea spoke up again. "Their reasons are not of concern to us, cariÃ±o." Astrid picked up this one foreign word, but could not

recognize it. "If they are ready, they shall speak of it. For now, perhaps, we should tell the others. One last night on this place will suffice. What we search for does not seem to be in here."

Mateo crossed his large, scarred arms over his broad chest and exited the tent, not another word from his lips.

Ellea smiled softly, apologetically, resting her elbows on the table. "Forgive him. It is not that he does not trust you, Hiccup. But the solution I see for your problem is not pleasing him."

"What solution would that be?" Hiccup asked, tilting his head out of habit; his grip on Astrid's tunic loosened.

"A wise woman. She is very old, very powerful. Mateo does not believe in Gods, or divine powers. He does not believe her. Says she is just old and crazy," Ellea shrugged, but her eyes were focused on Hiccup and Astrid. "Yet she foretold you would arrive. I could not believe until I saw you."

"What do you mean?" Astrid asked. She believed in her own Gods, not the foreign ones. And being this far off her homeland, she verily doubted Ellea was referring to Norse deities. Still, all godly things had this sort of mystique wrapped around them; the notion of tampering with deities of any kind did not appeal to Astrid.

Ellea sighed. She stood, walked over to the mattress on the floor, and bent down. Silently, she pulled up a small chest from behind the screen and brought it to the table. It was made of black wood, engraved with a series of intricate designs, and opened to reveal a delicate-looking amphora. She took three black metal cups from inside the chest, pouring the contents of the amphora into them; the ruby liquid filled the air with an inviting, spicy aroma.

"Share this drink with me, as I will share our story with you," she raised her cup slightly toward them; Hiccup and Astrid mimicked the gesture. Cautious, Astrid waited for Ellea to swallow; only then was her tongue met with the flavoured fluid. The sweet taste lifted her spirits somewhat, and the strong afterbite it left in her mouth was a most welcome sensation. It was delicious, and helped her sharpen her focus.

"Romans may be swine, but they know to enjoy the finer things."

Hiccup's face fell a little. "I should have guessed." He glanced back down at the cup, twisted his nose, and took another sip anyway. Ellea smirked, nodding.

"We are on a quest," Ellea began, bending forward upon the wooden table, her voice lower than before, "not even all of our crew knows everything. We do not trust all of them; yet I will confide in you."

"But _why_?" Astrid asked, boggled. She couldn't keep the feeling of suspicion at bay, couldn't find it in herself to be as naïve as Hiccup, no matter what brief past those two may have shared.

"Because I do not believe in coincidences. You two rode a storm."

* * *

><p>Ruffnut spoke to her brother in hushed tones as they handled bags filled with goods; even inside the safety of their own house, the looming sensation of danger from the other tribe seemed to cling to them, suspended in the air like a foul stench.</p>

The gang wanted to be ready to go out as soon as the Chief issued to search for Hiccup and Astrid. Being prepared beforehand was a sure proof way to save time.

They were concerned, all of them; something was clearly wrong. And as a group of dragon riders and companions, they felt it was their obligation to help get to the bottom of this. For the sake of their friendship. For loyalty.

If they were discrete enough, they would all be able to leave unnoticed. Perhaps they would rally some younger riders, to cover more ground. Snotlout guaranteed he would make sure to talk to the young ones; he left in search of Gustav and his peers. Fishlegs went home to plan their routes on the maps. Ruffnut and Tuffnut were to gather some supplies.

They were doing this; they were saving their friends. They hated the whole business anyway. It didn't seem right, to force a marriage like this. What's worse â€“ to _that_ foul tribe.

The 'rescue mission' was about to happen. They had set their minds to itâ€! But they could not have foreseen what was about to unfurl; nobody could have.

There was a knock on the door of the Thorston household; they could hear the Chief calling out from outside as he banged his fist on the wood, and the twins' mother scurried to open the creaky door.

Stoick and Athole made their way inside; Ruffnut and Tuffnut did their best to remain inconspicuous, hurriedly covering the items they'd been listing just a moment before. The way their Chief looked at them made Ruff's stomach plummet. Something was going on, and she had no idea how to play along with it.

Athole's unreadable gaze fell on Ruffnut; she shivered as he sized her, but stood in her place as the profane man took several steps closer.

"Blonde 'air, blue eyesâ€! thought she'd be prettier, though," the outsider Chief growled, his voice dripping with mistrust.

"That's her," Stoick assured him with a nod. "She is the one they told you about."

Athole leaned in dangerously close; so close, Ruffnut could smell the vomit on his clothes, the wine and rot behind his breath as he spoke. She steeled her stomach, biting down the bile building in the back of her throat.

"Hiccup's girl, thenâ€! Aren't you?" He asked.

Ruffnut needed a moment to adjust to the words, to let her brain process the implication. She nodded, half-stunned, holding her breath in â€“ not just because of the smell, but because of the realization of _what_ was happening. Even her brother did; from the corner of her eye she saw him stiffen, his face twisting angrily, their mother finding support on his shoulders. They all remained silent.

"You weren't thinkin' 'o runnin' off after 'im, I wonder?" Athole's voice was calm, casual, cold. Dangerous.

"Of course not," Ruffnut blurted out, her mind reeling. _What do I do, what do I say?_

The foul foreigner smirked, one of his hands now resting on the pommel of the sword he carried at his waist. "Good thing, lass. I don' mind ye shaggin' 'im off in the sidelines, long as you keep any male bastards from spewin' out between yer legs. An' if a boy does come outta there," Athole pulled the sword just slightly from its hilt; it gleamed by the light of the fire from the hearth, "I'll personally lop the bloody 'ead off of it. You get this?"

Ruffnut nodded mechanically, replying with a very stiff "Yes." The part where he'd lop _her_ head off too was left unsaid, but still crystal clear.

"That's enough now, Athole. You don't need to do this. I told you, Hiccup left because of problems in Glum â€“" Stoick began, but was interrupted by Athole's dismissive hand.

"Dun' care why the boy left or wha's he doin', Stoick. I dun' even care if he's offta find 'imself a whole ship full 'o concubines, just as long as he gets 'ere in time for the weddin', " Athole said, shrugging, slipping his sword back into its place. "Othe'wise, we're gonna have to think up a different solutionâ€!"

He looked around, then, his gaze falling on Tuffnut. "You 'ave a sister, girl?"

"I'm her _brother_," Tuffnut barked back, his blood just about to boil. Their mother's hold on his shoulders tightened instantly.

The Bunkerhead Chieftain merely laughed â€“ a booming, crackling sound, oddly unsettling â€“ and then turned to Stoick. "I'll need somethin' to ensure me it will all go according to plan; a token of your good faith, if you will."

Stoick couldn't even bother keeping his face devoid of anger, or his voice absent disgust. None of this seemed to phase Athole, anyway; the man was certainly used to causing this reaction on people. "How do you mean, Athole?"

"I'm leavin' me daughter 'ere at your care, with an escort of courseâ€! Per'aps we could trade in kind."

* * *

><p>END OF CHAPTER 10</p>

* * *

><p>This chapter was becoming too long, so I had to break it off. :p

Again, story progress - no time for steamy Hiccstrid/Asscup moments in their current situation, anyway. They've gotten themselves into quite a big mess!

**You can expect... something in the upcoming chapter though.
XD**

End
file.